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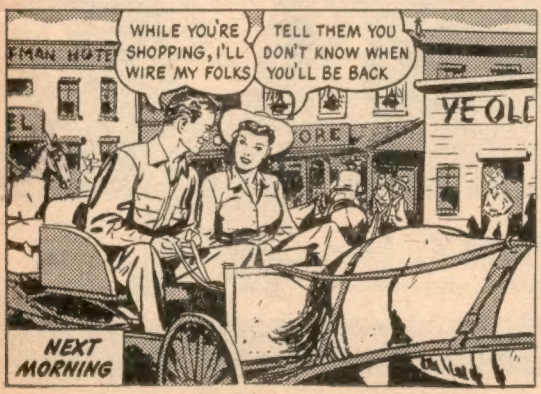

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Vol. 22, No. 2 CONTENTS October, 1950

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THE STRAWBOSS

By THE EDITOR

The fate of the entire Ute Indian Nation depended on this wiry little man with the pinched face and fierce eagle eyes. Would he win for them their destiny as the biggest Nation in the West—or plunge their great name into infamy and disgrace?

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THE STRAWBOSS

(Continued from page 6)

in the San Juan Mountains, witnessing an ancient Indian rite by the Spring That Heals. How about that for a name?

In the Navaho country there, Harry F. has come up with this interesting sidelight on the Navaho and Ute Indians. Go ahead, Harry:

Dear Strawboss:

The thought that in two weeks I will be back at the old stand sends my mind flying back over my experiences during the last two months. One scene stands out, and one picture resurrected from the musty pages of faded archives. It occurs to me that your readers might enjoy the moment stolen from the past. But whether or not you agree, the yarn is worth telling.

I stood beside the great boiling pool called by the Ute Indians *Pa-Go-Sah*, meaning Spring That Heals. Looking south along the San Juan River, the sleepy little village of Pagosa Springs was on my right and on my left was a scatteration of cabins for the convenience of those seeking health at the baths. Below these cabins and stretching along the east side of the river for some distance was a lush pasture or meadowland, bordered by pine-clad hills.

The early sunlight tinted the peaks of the Continental Divide. Trout were leaping on the deep pool below the springs. Blackbirds dipped and whirled above the meadow. Altogether it was a scene of peace as healing to the spirit as the hot waters are to ailing bodies. Yet there was a time, long before the town of Pagosa Springs was dreamed of, before Fort Lewis was established here to deter the Utes from dreams of war, when the scene was less peaceful and when an escrow fee was paid in blood.

For many hundreds of years, maybe thousands, the Utahs (known now as

(Continued on page 10)

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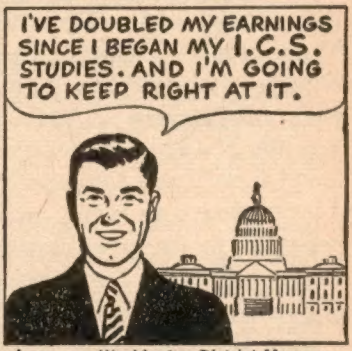

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(Continued from page 8)

Utes) frequented the Valley of Pa-Go-Sah to boil out their bodily ills and to enjoy the wonderful hunting. The place, teeming with deer, bear, mountain sheep and goats, was deep in their hinterland and there were no enemies to embarrass them while they hunted, bathed and played.

Then along about the year 1400, a wandering tribe of tall warriors suddenly appeared, men with physiques to match those of the war-loving Utahs, men who walked with a frown and a chip on the shoulder. These people, calling themselves the *Dineh-eh,* named by the early Spanish explorers the *Apache de Navajoa* and called now the Navahoes, tested the Utahs and found them tough and unyielding.

And thus was begun an enmity that persisted, to the great detriment of both tribes, until Kit Carson broke the power of the Navaho nation in the 1860's.

Like the Utahs, the Navahoes found Pa-Go-Sah to their liking, and furiously strove to hurl the Utahs from it. For four hundred years the battle raged intermittently—now the Navahoes having possession, now the Utahs. Tens of thousands of fine warriors—the flower of both tribes—stained the earth with their life blood, without either side attaining full possession.

Then, having declared a truce wherein both tribes might use the waters while they fought the increasing pressure of the fur brigades combing the Rocky Mountains for peltry, the elders of both tribes agreed to hurl their warriors against one another on the meadow below the spring, the winners to have undisputed ownership of the Pa-Go-Sah, the loser to withdraw forever.

On the appointed day, both tribes came down in force. It was a stirring sight as ponies came from the passes with travois and tepees stabbed their sharp fingers toward the sky. Navahoes came on their swift ponies, racing up and down the flats, their lances glinting in the sun, their shrill challenges stinging the watching Utes, who beat their chests and flung back vulgarities so dear to the Indian heart.

Anger filled the peaceful valley of Pa-Go-Sah. And fear rode there too and a sense of the terrible price that must still be paid for something that had been bought over and over for centuries by blood. It preyed upon the elders and they gave the sign and there was another powwow, with many speeches.

The hours passed and the day waned. And then the final decision was made. Each tribe would choose a champion to make its fight. Title would be passed after the loss of one man. The elders had spoken. There were no dissenters.

Warriors, blanketed and austere, ranged along both sides of the battle ground. Women of both tribes were grouped on the hillside. Dogs raced and barked and fought. Women toiled at the cooking fires, that there would be food after the issue was resolved. Now the Navaho champion made his appearance—an extraordinary figure of a man standing a half foot over six feet tall and weighing as much as two ordinary men. He strode up and down before the Utes, pounding his great chest and taunting the Utahs as midgets, children, weaklings.

The Utah chiefs and elders were appalled. In all their nation there was no such giant as this. They had been slower than the Navahoes to choose and now they regretted having to make a choice, for yonder giant must surely win. And while they indulged their pessimism, one of their warriors stepped up—a small wiry man with a pinched face and fierce eagle eyes.

His hair was the color of corn silk and there was no other in the tribe like him. For Al Pfiefer, pioneer guide, scout for wagon trains across the plains, Indian fighter, fur brigadier and reputedly a

(Continued on page 128)

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BLOODY STRIP!

By MAX KESLER

CHAPTER ONE

Full House

HE KNEW it was a trap the moment he walked in and saw them sitting there. Only it wasn't the kind of trap you could shoot your way out of. That was what made it all the more deadly. You knew you couldn't escape.

Something black and hopeless welled up within him then—yet he kept it from his face. Long ago, he'd learned to do that.

In one split second, Jim Overby must decide if he would back the tough, beaten wildcatters who'd pinned their last hopes on him—or sell out the whole Cherokee Strip to a power-mad oil-queen hellcat . . .

Just as he'd learned to accept the fact he would never be free of them. Or of the past.

And yet, he thought bitterly, he *had* hoped this time. Just this one more deal, Jim, they'd said three years ago. And you'll be free of us. He'd believed them. He'd gone through with the play. And afterward, he'd ridden away because he couldn't stand being around people he'd betrayed.

What a fool—what a damned fool he'd been to believe them! They'd never leave him alone. He knew it now.

Standing there, he studied them in silence. Lance Carter, tall, handsome in a lean way, lazily arrogant—the brains of the outfit. Mike Shane, thick bodied, square jawed, with flaming red hair and sledge-hammer fists—the field man. Slim Halliday, a tubercular with a thin, sensitive face, the hands of a musician and the brain of a killer. And finally, Shelia Maddox—the bait.

Slowly, not wanting to, he looked at her. It was the same as it had always been. The familiar quickening of his pulse, the old hungry yearning, the bitterness.

Why couldn't he get her out of his system? She was no good and he knew it. Yet something—

Three years, he noted, had not changed her. Tall, with a deceptive slenderness that accentuated the curving grace of her body. Black hair dropping smoothly to her shoulders in a rolled-under effect. An olive skin and high cheek bones that somehow gave her an exotic appearance. Clear gray eyes—cool, remote, mocking—filled with the arrogant challenge of the untamed. Meeting them now, he saw that the challenge was still there.

Shelia dragged on her cigarette, her thin upper lip twisting. She let the smoke out slowly, her head thrown back a bit, and smiled at him.

"Hello, Jim." Her voice was rich, lazy. "Surprised?"

He didn't say anything—just stood there and looked at her.

Through the half open door, music from a three piece orchestra shredded the silence. The Gusher was doing a roaring business. The crews from the outlying leases were in to celebrate.

Without turning, he kicked the door shut. Anger was building up within him now, trying to crowd out the trapped feeling already there.

"What are you doing in Marlow?" he said harshly. "I thought I'd seen the last of you."

"Marlow's a nice town, Jim." Smiling, Lance Carter hooked a chair away from the table. "Sit down and have a drink. You're upset."

"Sure." Mike Shane grinned, showing strong white teeth. "Nothing like a drink to take away tension. Eh, Slim?"

SLIM HALLIDAY said nothing. His eyes were still. Dying, he hated everything and everybody. Even Shelia, who laughed in his face every time he told her he loved her.

They haven't changed, Overby thought. The same smooth manners and phony smiles, the same "Sit down, Jim, and have a drink," greeting—and behind it all, the same purpose for tracking him down. Just this one more deal, Jim, and then we'll not bother you again.

Always one more deal. Always he gave in. And afterward he tried to start all over again somewhere else. New towns, new faces, new jobs. Trying to froget. And always the past rising up like the dead who would not die.

He wanted to tell them to go to hell, and walk out. But it would only be a futile gesture. They'd simply smile and go on drinking. After a while, he'd come back just as they had known he would.

What the hell was the use of kidding himself? It wasn't fear of the pen that held him, it was fear for Shelia. He knew

what would happen if he refused to come in on the deal. Shelia would carry out the dangerous part intended for him. She'd do it deliberately, knowing he wouldn't let her go through with it. No, he always came in.

Suddenly the fight went out of him. His broad shoulders slumped. He sat down and poured himself a stiff drink. The liquor steadied him. He looked at Lance.

"All right," he said harshly. "What's the deal this time? I'll listen but I'll have no part in it. I've got a good job here, people respect me. You're not going to wreck that for me again."

Shelia laughed—soft, mocking laughter that cut at him like a knife. She could still hurt him. Furthermore, she knew, as well as he did, that he was just talking now.

"This is big-time, Jim." Lance leaned back, studying him with narrowed eyes. "We need you on it."

Overby said nothing. He poured himself another drink. "Go on." His voice was tight. "I'm listening."

For a second, an electric silence pulsed around the table. Lance Carter's eyes dropped. Mike Shane's big fists clenched and unclenched nervously. The rise and fall of Shelia's breasts quickened. Only Slim Halliday showed no emotion. But then he was dying and he knew it. Nothing mattered to him.

Quick to sense their tension, Overby frowned. He'd known them too long. Whatever the deal was, Lance was telling the truth. It was big—damned big.

Lance poured himself another shot. He downed it and then looked thoughtfully at Overby. "How long have you been working for Tom Pearson, Jim?"

"About a year," Overby said and frowned. "Why?"

Lance shrugged. "Just wondering. I understand Pearson's brought in too many dry holes the past few months. There is talk circulating that he's broke."

Something began to quiver in Overby. He didn't know where the play was leading. But Tom Pearson was his friend. And Lance wasn't talking about Pearson for nothing.

"Tom's business is his own," he said shortly. "How did you happen to hear this talk anyway?"

Shelia laughed softly. "We get around, Jim. And Pearson's pretty important here in the Strip. If he fails, most of these wildcatters are likely to take off for a new field. A smart operator could buy up leases for a song then. What about No. 6 Angela, Jim?"

SO THEY'D been here in the strip for some time. Overby's mouth tightened. But why this interest in Tom Pearson's No. 6 Angela? What connection was there between Tom Pearson's well and them?

His eyes shifted from Lance to Shelia and back again. He didn't like it. He said nothing.

"Come on, Jim." A note of impatience edged Carter's voice. "You're Pearson's chief driller. We know that. You've worked for him long enough to know how he stands—both on the Angela and financially. Now talk."

Overby showed his teeth. "Go to hell," he said and shoved back his chair.

"Sit down, Overby." Slim Halliday's gun was out. His eyes were flickering. He had not raised his voice.

Overby looked at the gun, then at Slim. "I don't like you, Slim," he said. "I never did. One of these days I'm going to kill you."

"Sit down, Overby." Slim's voice was flat. Two bright spots of color flamed in his cheeks.

"Don't be a fool, Jim," Carter said sharply. "Start trouble and things will come out that you don't want out."

Slowly Overby sank back. He was breathing heavily. He knew that Carter was right. Even if Halliday didn't kill

him, they'd still talk, and he would be finished here. His breath went out through clenched teeth.

Without taking his eyes from Overby, Halliday slipped his gun into its holster. Mike Shane eased back in his seat. Carter was frowning.

"Someday, darling," Shelia remarked coolly. "Slim is going to forget and pull the trigger. He's jealous of you. He's afraid I may fall in love with you yet. And perhaps someday I will. Who knows?"

Her gray eyes, remote as she was, mocked Overby.

A sick resentment gripped him. God, if he could only hate her instead of love her. If he was half a man—But then he wasn't, and he knew it. So did they. That was why the trap held. Escape was possible, but only if he jeopardized Shelia's life. And he couldn't do it—no matter what.

"Well, Jim?" said Lance. "What about it?"

Resistance went out of Overby then. What the hell, he thought. It wouldn't hurt to tell hem. Afer all, the whole Strip knew about Tom Pearson's troubles.

"Pearson's broke," he said flatly. "He's sunk every dime he's got into the Angela. If it doesn't blow in, he's finished."

Carter looked pleased. "What are his chances?"

For an instant, Overby hesitated. "We started taking cores yesterday at seventeen hundred and fifty feet. The last two were oil-saturated. She'll blow in a gusher. Maybe tomorrow, maybe two or three days."

"Dammit, Lance," Mike Shane exploded. "There goes twenty thousand dollars for that damned lease! Even if we spud in now and make a strike, Pearson will tie us in knots legally. You know the law. If his production falls off, he'll prove we tapped his pool—and we're finished."

SUDDENLY it hit Overby. He'd wondered who that Guthrie lawyer had been representing last week when he'd bought up the tract next to the Angela. It was like them—scavengers who moved in after another man had gambled his last dime to prove a field. Then buy up around him and try to squeeze him out.

"So it was *you* who bought up the Hempsted acreage," he said. "Pearson wanted that lease but he didn't have the money to swing the deal. Well, Mike's right—you've got yourself a white elephant. Nine chances out of ten you'll hit the same pool. Looks like you've slipped for once, Lance."

He grinned and Carter gave him a lazy smile. Carter didn't look unhappy.

"No, Jim," he jeered. "You're still just a little thick between the ears. You and Mike. What Mike says is true, *if* Pearson should bring in a well. Only—" He looked at Shelia.

Shelia uncrossed her slim legs and rose. Coming around the table, she slipped one arm around Overby's shoulders and said softly, "Only, you see, Jim—Pearson isn't going to bring in the Angela. A torpedo filled with forty pounds of black powder is going to drop down the bore hole. An accident, of course. But then you understand, don't you, darling? You've been involved in accidents before."

Her voice was half amused. Her hand caressed his cheek with a possessive gentleness.

For a frozen instant, Overby sat there, and it seemed to him that even his heart had stopped beating. He could not believe it. All the things in the past had been bad enough. But this—to try and force him into a play that would wipe out Tom Pearson, his best friend—

His anger broke through then. Anger and disgust and hatred for the whole lousy bunch of them. What the hell kind of man did they think he was, anyway? How low did they figure he would sink?

Swinging Shelia around, he jerked her close to him. "You little witch!" he said hoarsely and slapped her full in the face. "You dirty little witch!"

For a long moment, she looked at Overby. Her face was strangely still. Her eyes were glacial, with icy pin-points for pupils. Then a thin, wintry smile curved her lips into a cynical twist. She dragged on her cigarette. Her hand trembled slightly.

"You surprise me, Jim," she said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Overby just sat there, feeling sick. He couldn't believe that he had struck her. He must have been out of his mind.

He stared at her, dumb-eyed. He wanted to say he was sorry, to take her in his arms and tell her he was just a hot-headed fool. But he knew it would be useless. Women like Shelia, proud and arrogant—with fire running through them behind their cold masks—never forgave. They smiled, they kept their emotions behind a quiet, unruffled exterior, and then one day they destroyed you.

The crimson imprint of his fingers on her cheek stood out clearly now. The blow had stung—yet he knew that it was her ego that had suffered. For a split second, he was glad that he had done it. Then the feeling was gone, and with it his last chance.

WITH a tired gesture, he turned to the three men. Mike Shane had a vice-like grip on Slim Halliday's wrist. Slim was fighting to swing his gun on Overby. The spots of color in his cheeks were flaming red. He was cursing.

"Damn you, Mike!" he said. "Let go of me! I'll kill that son!"

The gunman's fury calmed Overby. He hated Halliday for the same reason Halliday hated him. They were both in love with the same woman. Also, he hated him for the degenerate killer he was.

"Take his gun, Mike," Carter said. "He's trigger-happy today."

There was a brief struggle, then Mike Shane tossed the .45 to Carter. Halliday sank back, his thin chest heaving. He began to cough, a soft, moist cough that brought a trickle of blood to his mouth. He wiped it away with a handkerchief. His eyes stayed fixed on Overby. He kept coughing.

Mike Shane turned to Overby muttering something. He didn't like Slim Halliday. But then he didn't like what Overby had done either.

"One of these days, Slim," said Overby, "we're going to have it out. Maybe now would be as good a time as any."

Mike's big hand bit into his arm. "There'll be no gun play, Jim, until this deal is finished. Then you two can blow each other's guts out, as far as I'm concerned." Mike was smiling, but his eyes were granite hard.

So far, Carter had said nothing. Now he looked at Shelia, then back to Overby. He frowned.

"I wish you hadn't done that, Jim. Shelia's a strange woman. Sometimes I think she loves you, as much as she can ever love any man. But you've hurt her ego, Jim. You turned on her, and she's not sure of you anymore. Now she'll hate you—as well as love you—as long as she lives. It's going to make things harder for all of us."

"Hate him?" Shelia's voice was like cool honey. "Why, Lance, I'm madly in love with him! Can't you see that?"

There was a half hysterical note in her voice, and a mere hint of desperation. For an instant, the cold remoteness left her eyes. Then, so quickly that Overby wondered if he had imagined it, it was back again.

"It's my job to be in love with him, isn't it, Lance?" she said. "Or at least to keep him loving me. Otherwise, where would we be when we need him?"

"Cut it, Shelia!" Lance snapped. "This

is no time for jokes." He regarded Overby in studied silence. Finally, he shrugged.

"I'd hoped you would be reasonable, Jim," he said. "I'm still hoping that. There's a one-fifth partnership in this for you. And, frankly, if the deal works out, we can all forget the past.

"That's what you want, Jim. All right, play ball with us and you'll have it. Refuse and—you know the answer. Shelia's headstrong. No strange man could get near the Angela, but a woman's another matter. If you won't do it, she will. And a torpedo's a dangerous thing for a woman to fool around with. If anything happened to her, Jim, it would be on your hands, not ours."

He was watching Overby closely. His concern for Shelia would have fooled anyone else, but not Overby. And yet what he said was true. Shelia *would* go through with it. That was the hell of it.

"Now take a walk and cool down," Carter said blandly. "Think it over. Then come back here."

Standing, Overby picked up his hat. "I told you, Lance, that I was through. That stands."

"Just the same—" Carter made a neat ring on the table with his glass. "Think it over. You might change your mind. Right now, you're upset."

Shelia's laughter—soft, mocking—followed Overby from the room. Sometime, he thought, that laughter was going to drive him mad. In itself, it didn't matter so much—it was why she laughed. She knew him too well. And that laughter was a taunting reminder of how hoplessly he was trapped.

CHAPTER TWO

The Shake-Down

THE scrambled sounds of music, loud talk, the clink of glasses and the stomp of heavy eight-inch driller's boots as men swung their percentage girl partners in a wild dance drowned out Shelia's laughter. Overby worked his way through them to the bar.

The Gusher boasted the most elaborate set-up west of Chicago. A hundred thousand dollar investment, it was the forerunner of the gilt and plush emporiums which were to empty the pockets of oil men throughout the boom days of the Strip.

At least a hundred men jammed the place as Overby threaded toward the hundred foot mahogany bar. Men from all walks of life—before the oil fever had heated their veins. Bankers, lawyers, white collar workers, farmers.

Whatever they had once been lay in the past. The Cherokee Strip was a harsh land, a brutal land, but a land that promised wealth and adventure and death for those strong enough to stay and fight. These men had. They were oil men now, with the stamp of wind and rain and sun and hardship on them.

A roughneck rubbed shoulders with a millionaire; a tool pusher argued with a lease hound carrying twenty thousand dollars in his pocket; a driller argued with a man who owned three producers; and a grizzled old wildcatter sounded off to a young geologist that he didn't know the first damn thing about locating oil. This was democracy at its best.

But more important, Overby thought—here was a spirit of comaraderie untouched by the partisanship and enmity that so often came with the oil kings. It was good this way, and it was the way it should be. But it would all go if men like Lance Carter and his kind gained a foothold here. Money-hungry, merciless, power-mad— He didn't like to think about it.

A burly driller said, "Hello, Jim," and made room for him at the bar next to Tom Pearson. Tom was drinking Scotch straight but he wasn't drunk. He could

drink any man in the Strip under the table. He shoved the bottle over to Overby.

Silently, Overby filled his glass, then studied Pearson in the back bar mirror.

Tom Pearson was a little man, tough and gnarled as a scrub oak. His snow white hair was brushed straight back from his forehead. From beneath bushy eyebrows, keen, shewd eyes surveyed the world with a mild tolerance. Those eyes offset the fierceness of his Roman nose and longhorn mustaches. Wind and sun had burned his skin a rich nut brown. Although he was sixty-two, he carried himself with an erectness and his body was as tough as whip-cord.

He'd been one of the original roustabouts with Tom Drake in 1859. Overby knew him for one of the best wildcatters in the game, and the whitest man he had ever known.

Scowling, Overby took his drink neat. A second went down on top of it. He still had not spoken to Pearson. But when he reached for the third, the old man said quietly, "That Scotch packs a wallop, Jim. But whatever's eating you, that won't help."

No, Overby thought and shoved the bottle away. It wouldn't help. Nothing was going to help except guts. Just enough guts to go back there and tell them to go to hell. And if Shelia wanted to get her beautiful little head blown off, then that was all right, too. Just the guts to do that, and he'd be free.

Only he didn't have the guts and he never would have. What the hell was the use of kidding himself? Shelia held him in the palm of her hand, neatly tied hand-and-foot by a stupid emotion called love, and he couldn't break the cords.

Scowling, he studied his own face in the back bar mirror. It wasn't a bad face as faces went. Tanned, clean-cut, steady eyes, a strong jaw, and a generous mouth. No, it wasn't a bad face. There was character there—and guts. Guts enough to have called a show down with Lance and the boys long ago. But not the right kind of guts to break away from Shelia.

HE CAUGHT Tom Pearson watching him in the mirror, and was reminded of what had gone on back there in the room. He felt guilty and took it out on Pearson.

"All right," he said harshly. "Why don't you come out and ask me who they are? And what I was doing back there so long? Instead of just standing there, wondering?"

The old man's searching eyes rested on him a moment. "You work for me, Jim," he said. "And on trips into town we get drunk together. I reckon we're friends. But your private life is your own business."

A flush heated Overby's face. He was remembering that this taciturn little man had given him a job when he was flat broke. That, only yesterday, Tom Pearson had cut him in as an equal partner in his half of the Angela. Now, knowing what he did and turning on his best friend just because he was trapped— It made him feel like a dog.

"Sorry, Tom," he said. "I don't know what got into me. It's just that I haven't seen them for a long time and Shelia— Oh, hell, nothing."

Pearson spun the bottle back to Overby. He was silent. Yet Overby knew he was not fooled. The old man had gotten a good look at the bunch as they'd headed for that back room. And he was too good a judge of character not to know their kind. A man introduced his best friend to his other friends. Overby hadn't. Tom would notice that, just as he'd tie in this sudden flare-up with that meeting in the back room.

Overby glared moodily at the Scotch. "Dammit, Tom, you make me feel guilty

as hell. I'd introduce you only—well, I don't know them too well and—" He couldn't go on.

Pearson smiled. "She must have you tied in knots, boy," he said. "Now forget it." Abruptly, he switched the subject. "Maybe you'd better not take the graveyard shift tonight. Get some rest. I'll send Bart Adams out."

Quickly Overby said, "Thanks, Tom. I am a little upset." Actually, he was thinking that if he holed up somewhere so the gang couldn't find him, he'd be morally in the clear, regardless of what they did.

But it was poor rationalization. The whole thing boiled down to one fact. Either he warned Pearson or handled the bunch in his own way, or he was a rotten double-crosser selling out his best friend. Yet if he talked, it would endanger Shelia. He swung toward Pearson.

"Those last cores, Tom," he said, a little desperately. "What do you think about them?"

Gravity touched the little man's face. "Jim, every dime I've got is sunk into the Angela. And more. But that's the least of it. They're watching the Angela all the way to Pennsylvania. If she's a dry hole or a salt water well, the Strip as a field is finished. If she's a strike, they'll stampede here in droves. Maybe you don't like the idea. But, Jim, it takes capital to build a country. And I want to see us grow."

A twinkle replaced the seriousness in his eyes. "You want to know what I think? I figure we'll bring her in tomorrow, and that she'll blast the crown block sky high!"

Overby had known that was what he would say. What he'd wanted him to say. Now, if he could keep the bunch from taking any action tonight, tomorrow would be too late.

Still, they were already impatient to get into action.

READING the worry on his face, Pearson looked toward the back room. Little creases gathered between his eyes.

"Look, Jim," he said. "You're in some sort of trouble. More'n just woman trouble. Of course, it's your business. But if I can help—"

Overby tightened up. To know that he was on the verge of double-crossing Pearson was bad enough, without having the old man express concern for him. It made him feel even more guilty, and it infuriated him.

"Dammit, Tom!" He whirled angrily on the little wildcatter. "I'll handle my affairs—you handle yours. And with Lance Carter owning the Hempsted acreage—"

His voice faded away. You loud-mouthed fool! he thought. Now you've really fixed things! Slowly, he reached for the bottle. His hand was shaking. He did not look at Pearson.

The silence was like a personalized vacuum—shutting out the noise and laughter about him.

"So you sold me out, Jim," said Pearson quietly. "When I could buy up the Hempsted tract you contact your 'friends' and they picked it up. You knew that the pool was either on my lease or the Hempsted property. If we brought in a dry hole, and things *didn't* look too good weeks before last, I'd be finished. And you along with me. So you thought you'd play it safe. Being cut in by your friends, you couldn't lose."

His voice was flat and there was pain in it. "You're smart, Jim—too smart for your own good sometimes. What you didn't know was that I could have raised the money in a week. If you'd waited, we could have sunk a dozen producers on that acreage.

"As it is, you've cut your own throat—in more ways than one. You see, Jim, I've been in the oil business from its beginning. There's not a crook in the

game I don't know, or know all about."

Something dark and paralyzing began to crawl over Overby's mind. He wanted to tell Tom that he was all wrong, but the words wouldn't come to him. Instead, he fixed his gaze desperately on Tom, and the darkness kept growing within him.

"Lance Carter and Shelia Maddox," continued Pearson inexorably. "The cleverest team of checker-board artists in the country! Before that—shake-down and blackmail. And further back, a couple of bank jobs among other things. A teller was killed in the last one. Hell, I recognized the pair of them the minute they walked in."

Sweat prickled Overby's face. By sheer force of will he kept his eyes on the Scotch bottle. Pearson's words hit him with brutal surprise. He couldn't even fully understand the significance of what had been said. Worse, he knew there was more to come, and there was nothing he could say.

"Mike Shane." The old wildcatter's voice was a monotone. "The field man of the bunch. Slim Halliday—to handle those who won't play ball. And—" his voice cracked—"and *you*, Jim, the leader until after that last bank job. From there on, just a brilliant tool in the hands of a woman from hell."

The bottle vanished from Overby's sight. He heard it click against Pearson's glass. Then the bottle reappeared. Only now he could keep his mind on that bottle.

So Tom Pearson knew about him, he thought dully. Had known from the first. His mind couldn't quite grasp things. Tom had known, and yet he'd not only kept quiet but had even made him a partner.

"So you've known from the beginning?" he said, without raising his eyes.

"Yes, Jim, I've known."

"Then why in hell did you hire me? Why didn't you turn me over to the marshal?"

"Why?" The old man's voice was bitter. "Because somehow, despite your past, I had faith in you."

If he'd wanted to shame, to hurt, Overby thought, he'd succeeded. Because it was the first time anyone had ever told him that. The first time any man, knowing his past, had ever been willing to gamble on him.

Now, Tom thought, he had failed him. Only he hadn't, not in the way it seemed. He hadn't sent for Lance and Shelia. He hadn't told them about the Hempsted tract. He hadn't even known they were in the Strip. And as yet, he hadn't given in to their plan.

He tore his eyes away from the bottle. "Tom, you've got things all—" His voice trailed away. The space next to him at the bar was empty.

Across the room, the bat wings were just closing shut on Tom Pearson's erect little figure.

Impulsively, Overby started after him—and halted. He knew Tom. Slow to reach a decision, but once he'd made up his mind—

Overby shoved away from the bar and headed for the door. His mind was dazed. He had to think and thought was impossible here, with all the noise. He had to think.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sell-Out

OUTSIDE, the cool night air struck him in the face. Rid of the furor within, his numbed mind gradually began to function. Yet that only made matters worse.

A half block down the street, he spotted Tom Pearson's wiry figure. The little wildcatter's shoulders were slumped. He stumbled along as if he was drunk. To trust a man and then to have that man betray you—

Watching him, Overby suddenly hated himself and everything he represented. For the first time in his life, he saw himself for what he really was, and it made him sick. Sicker even than he'd been after that last bank job.

He started after Pearson but something held him back. Now was not the time. Tom wouldn't listen. Later, perhaps. A coldness crept over him. A chill dread of that against which his heart cried out, and yet which he knew must be done.

For ten minutes, he stood there, while all the years of his life flowed swiftly through the tortured channels of his mind. Harsh, bitter years, filled with dark chapters.

Orphaned at thirteen, kicked around the Pennsylvania oil fields until he was old enough to roughneck. At twenty, ambitious but getting nowhere. At twenty-four, hard, bitter, frustrated. Unwilling now to sweat his way to the top as others had. Hell, no! Why should he? He had brains; the world was his apple.

Clever, planning, waiting—but still not getting anywhere. Tool pusher. Driller. A damned stinking driller! Other men bragged about being a driller. The stupid sons, working their guts out while another man raked in the money!

Not him, not Jim Overby! He was going to the top of the heap. If he had to smash a few people to get there, so what? People had damn well slapped him down enough!

And then he'd met Shelia Maddox, a product of the Chicago slums. A girl with beauty, brains and dreams like his own. But who as a honkeytonk dancer was a long way from her goal. Or so he'd thought until he found out the dancing was just a front. Hell, she was already two jumps ahead of him.

He had promptly fallen in love with her. Not just a passing affair, but the kind of love which becomes a part of a man and from which he can never be separated. Shelia had never committed herself. Yet she had never told him she *didn't* love him. And there were times when he thought she did. But he could never be sure.

Still, she had recognized and appreciated his talents. She was working with Lance and Mike and Slim even then. Petty stuff for the most part, but paying off. Within a week after he had met her, there had been five of them instead of four. Another three months and Lance Carter had turned over the show to him. Lance didn't care who led, as long as they made money.

And the five of them *had* prospered, spreading out into varied branches. Payroll wagons, oil kings who flashed fist-sized rolls of bills, shady lease deals—with Shelia as the bait or working on the inside to gain information for a job. But never giving herself to any man. She was no tramp, whatever else she was.

The money rolling in, but never enough. Always the insatiable hunger for more. Living recklessly and like kings until that last bank job in Oil City.

Slim had killed a teller there. A smooth-faced, mild-mannered young fool with more courage than sense. Overby might have forgotten it except that he saw the teller's wife the next day. And the kid, a slender, grave-faced five year old who stared up at his mother with wide, puzzled eyes and kept saying, "Mommy, why didn't Daddy say something? And, Mommy, why did they put Daddy in that big box?"

THAT WAS all he had heard because he was stumbling down the street like a drunken man, with a sudden awakened conscience whispering in his ears:

Sure, Slim killed him but you were in on the deal. Dammit, the man was a fool! Yes, but he was a human being, with the right to live.

Mommy, why didn't Daddy say something? Mommy, why did they put Daddy

in that big box? Where's Daddy going?

Three weeks he'd stayed drunk while Lance reasoned with him, Mike Shane cursed him for a fool, Slim threatened to kill him, and Shelia even offered to marry him.

Then suddenly he'd come out of it, dead sober and with his mind made up. He'd sent ten thousand dollars of his own money to the teller's wife, caught a train, gone as far as he could, then bought a horse and kept going until he hit the Cherokee Strip.

And after a year the wound had healed a little. The nightmares came fewer and farther between. He knew the blessedness of sleep after a hard day's work. And was grateful for the chance to work.

Then they'd found him. Things hadn't gone too well with them since he'd pulled out. They'd spent too much and needed money. And they had a good deal lined up.

He'd given in finally, and afterwards, he pulled out before the town put two and two together. Friendship, reputation, a good job, security—wiped out. Shelia and the bunch had let him go.

For six months.

Then it was the same thing, over and over again. They spent money fast. And all the while, he asked only to be allowed to go straight.

But they wouldn't let him. They hunted him down with an uncanny cunning. They had him now; they knew his weak spot was Shelia. Time and again he held out to the last minute. But Shelia's threat to go through with the job herself if he refused, always broke him. He knew she was cool and arrogant enough to do it. And the thought of a bullet ripping out her life was too much for him.

Always he had given in. Hating himself for his weakness, hating Shelia for using his love—yet with that love stronger than his hate. Destroying him a little at a time.

Now the flow of the years had swept up the channel to the present. And to the same old oft-faced decision.

Overby stared down the deserted street. Although Tom Pearson had disappeared, he could still visualize the slumped shoulders, the stumbling walk of a man who had trusted only to be betrayed.

A strange calmness settled over Overby. There was pain because of what he must do, yes. But it was a clean pain, free of any nagging sense of guilt.

Turning, he re-entered the Gusher.

THEY were sitting just as he had left them. The bottle of Scotch was down another two inches. Lance, sprawled lazily in his chair, Shelia smoking the ever present cigarette, Mike Shane a little drunk now, Slim Halliday pale-faced, unmoving.

Overby kicked the door shut.

No one said anything for a full minute. Lance Carter was smiling but his eyes were wary now. Mike Shane sobered and sat up, his hands gripping the table edge. Shelia ground out her cigarette.

With an easy grace, she rose and crossed to him. She looked directly into his eyes, searching, probing.

"You fool!" she said softly. "You weak, contemptible fool."

No one asked Overby his decision. It was written all over his face.

Overby stood looking at Shelia. Never had she seemed more beautiful, more desirable, or more unattainable. Still he knew that if he chose to bargain now, she would marry him. Not out of love, but because he was a necessary cog in a faltering machine.

That was what made it hard. He loved her, he wanted her. But not at the price he would have to pay. She could still hurt him. She would always be able to hurt him. But she could never again bring him to his knees. In that one sense, he was free of her. The fixed smile on her face

told him that she knew that he was, too.

"Give me a cigarette, Jim," she said calmly.

Overby gave her one, lit it. She dragged on it, jetted the smoke out in a thin stream. Then her cool eyes met his.

"You don't care anymore, do you, Jim?" Her voice was calm. Yet he sensed that she was hurt, not in terms of her ego, but as a woman.

"Do you, Jim?"

"Yes, I care," he said dully. "But I'm remembering something I should never have forgotten. When I was a kid, bumming around the oil fields wanting to be somebody, I used to envy people with an education. So I bought, stole or borrowed every kind of book I could lay my hands on. And I learned a lot. Once I read something that went like this, 'I could not love thee half so much, loved I not honor more.'

"For seven years, Shelia, you made me forget that. But I'm remembering now. That's why, even though I love you, I'll not give in this time. If anything happens to you—"

"Yes, Jim?" Her mouth was cynical. "And if I just should happen to get killed?"

Overby looked straight into her eyes, hating her.

"Then a part of me will die," he said quietly. "But I won't feel guilty."

WITHOUT a word, she turned and went back to the table.

It was Lance who broke the silence. "Very touching, Jim," he said. "But there's still a job to be done. If you won't come in, at least promise to stay out of the play completely. How about it?"

"Lance is right, Jim," said Mike Shane. "Stay out or we put you away for good."

Overby's eyes switched to Slim Halliday. Slim had not moved. He said nothing. But in his eyes was death.

"I'm not hunting trouble, Lance," said Overby. "But I'm warning you. Go ahead with this deal and you're going to have me to fight. Besides, you can't win. We're bringing in the Angela tomorrow."

A quick flame leaped into Lance's eyes. Mike Shane swore. Shelia stiffened. The silence was electric. Lance kept on smiling. But for the first time, his true nature shattered the bland surface of his face. His eyes were bleak, his mouth cruel and hard.

"How about it, Slim?" He didn't turn his head.

Halliday shoved back his chair. His eyes were opaque. One hand rested on the edge of the table.

"Either come in, Overby," he said. "Or I'm calling your hand, now. So make up your mind, and fast!"

This was it, Overby thought. Not only was he no longer useful to them; he had suddenly become dangerous to their plans. Now they were going to let Slim take care of him.

Halliday waited, the long fingers of his hand spread.

"Trouble with you, Slim," Overby's words were carefully spaced. "You're no gunman, you're just a four-flushing—"

Slim beat him to the draw but anger spoiled his aim. His first shot missed. His second plowed into the floor as Overby pumped three slugs into his chest. Blood gushed in a crimson torrent from his mouth. He sat there staring at Overby a moment, then slumped forward across the table.

Pivoting, Overby covered Lance and Mike Shane. Scowling, Mike dropped his hand away from his gun. Lance had not moved.

"You're faster than I thought, Jim," Carter said coolly. "But what I said still goes. Keep out of the play."

From the Gusher's bar, the noise broke off abruptly. The crowd was wondering what had happened. But no one cared to barge in and find out.

Overby shot a quick glance toward Shel-

ia. She sat looking at him with those strange, enigmatic eyes. Whatever she felt toward him, it wasn't hate.

"You continue to surprise me, Jim," she said.

"Don't be a fool, Shelia," said Overby. "Stay away from the Angela. You wouldn't have a chance."

She laughed then, the old taunting laughter. Yet there was a note of uncertainty in it now, and an odd, lost something which eluded Overby.

Overby turned and left the room. Ignoring the tense, curious crowd, he pushed out into the night.

At the livery stable, he saddled his horse, mounted and rode out of town at a fast clip. He was headed for Tom Pearson's No. 6 Angela.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Big Blow-Up

ORANGE-RED flares strung throughout the cross girders silhouetted the derrick's ninety foot framework starkly against the night sky. A strong wind had sprung up and the flares cast dancing shadows across the rig floor.

Near the bore hole, Tom Pearson straightened as Overby reined up. The old wildcatter's face was set, expressionless. He waited, not speaking.

Dismounting, Overby walked over.

"I'm not going to waste words, Tom," he said, even-voiced. "You can keep on thinking what you want to about me. But, damn you, listen. We haven't got much time."

Briefly, he explained the set-up from beginning to end. His love for Shelia. Her strange hold on him. Why the bunch had come to Marlow and why, now, they had to try and go on with their plan to blow up the Angela. How they stood to lose twenty thousand dollars.

"I had to kill Halliday back in town," Overby concluded. "But that won't stop the rest of them. In two or three hours, we're going to have our hands full."

When he had finished, Pearson stared at his boots a moment. Then he looked squarely at Overby.

"I reckon I owe you an apology, Jim," he said. "Course, most folks would say you've been a crazy, empty headed fool. Me, I know better. I loved a woman that way once. Damn near ruined me. It wasn't easy to break away, was it, Jim?"

"No," Overby said, sober voiced. "It wasn't easy. It still isn't. But it has to be that way."

He frowned toward the rig. There were a couple of roustabouts working with pipe wrenches but he didn't see Bart Adams, the other driller. He asked Pearson about it and the old man replied that he'd decided to work the night shift himself.

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Overby shook his head. Bart Adams was a handy man with a gun. Still, it was too late to do anything about it now.

"Get those fellows off the rig floor," he told Pearson. "Station one of them behind the tool shack and the other by the pump house. Then monkey up to the forble board yourself. You can cover everything from there."

Pearson gave orders to the two roughnecks and they faded toward their positions, wondering what it was all about. "And remember," Overby called after them. "No shooting unless they start it."

Rifle in hand, Pearson paused, holding to a cross girder. His face was grave.

"You don't have to mix in this, Jim," he said. "You've warned me. That's enough. If you'd rather ride back—"

They faced one another, with the orange-red light from the gas flares flickering across their faces.

"I'm staying, Tom," Overby said steadily. "But do me one favor, Tom—be careful when the shooting starts."

The old wildcatter hesitated. Then holding onto the rifle, he worked his way upward toward the forble board.

Overby turned away, shoulders slumping. He felt moody, depressed. It seemed to him as though all the years of his life had been directed toward this day, and that now he was going to pay for those years.

Wind sweeping in across the prairie carried with it the dampness of coming storm. To the southwest, sheet lightning flashed behind piled up banks of boiling clouds.

Overby stood there waiting for the storm to break. Not for the wind and rain that lay in the lowering sky, but for the thunder and lightning of guns and the flow of blood and the violence of death.

RAIN began falling around two o'clock in the morning. A steady, driving downpour that chilled to the marrow and cut down visibility almost to mere feet.

Crouched in the shelter of the pump house, Overby listened to the *chug chug-chug* of the donkey engine, was conscious of the monotonous movement of the walking beam driving the bit deeper and deeper into the earth.

The weird glow of the gas flares cut feebly through the night. High up on the forble board, Tom Pearson crouched over his rifle, waiting. He had come down for his slicker and gone back up immediately. Somewhere in the shadows the two roustabouts hunched down, tensed, guns out.

Listening, Overby strained to pick up some sound above the noise of the donkey engine and the beat of rain upon the pump house roof. They should have struck by now—*if* they were going to strike.

The tension which had been mounting steadily within him eased a bit. Perhaps, after all, Shelia had been bluffing him these past three years. Maybe she'd decided that the job was too risky. And now that he'd called her hand, she had backed down.

It would have been a cheering thought—if he could have believed it. But he realized it was merely wishful thinking. He knew Shelia's inflexible nature too well. She'd said she would go through with it, and she would.

Now that he had committed himself, a sickness was crawling throughout his system. Memories began to torture him. Memories which he couldn't shove out of his mind. Shelia standing close to him in that back room, beautiful, arrogant, cool.

For years, he'd made himself believe that hers was only a surface hardness. That life had kicked her in the face until she'd become twisted, distorted. Hating a world that had shown her no kindness. But he couldn't kid himself any longer. She was evil. She had been born evil, and nothing could ever change her.

There had been times, however, when he'd felt that she hated herself for what she was. Hated and yet did not wish to change.

Other memories, too, now. Little things that most men would remember. Small acts of kindness, generosity. The cynical way she brushed aside gratitude as though she feared her own emotions. It was as though some tiny grain of good had been imbedded in the midst of her evil nature to plague her.

The crash of gunfire from the tool shack, taken up in a second by the roustabout on the other side of the pump house ripped Overby's thoughts to shreds.

"Look out!" the roustabout yelled. "They're coming!" There was the soft thud of a bullet striking flesh and the voice shut off. From the forble board, Tom Pearson had opened up with the rifle.

With the sound of that first shot, Overby had slid around the corner of the pump house. Gun flame had stabbed at him from twenty feet away and a bullet splintered the wood near his head. He fired at Mike Shane's heavy bulk—twice—and Mike ploughed up the mud with his face.

SLUMPED back against the pump house, the roustabout Tom had stationed there was clutching his chest. He was dead. Overby crouched there, trying to pierce the driving wall of rain that lay about him.

The firing had died away now, and only the sound of the donkey engine and the pounding of the rain was left. Overby wondered whether the other roustabout was dead, and if Tom Pearson had been hit. The rifle up there on the forble board had not spoken for a full minute.

Rain slashed his face. He swore softly. Somewhere out there Lance was waiting his chance, while Shelia—

What a fool he was! Slipping, fighting for balance on the red mud, he floundered around the pump house. In his anxiety, he forgot caution, spilling out into the flare of light.

On the rig floor, he caught sight of Shelia, a three-foot metal cylinder in her arms. Somehow, under the cover of the rain, she'd slipped past Tom's rifle. Now even if Tom was still alive on the forble board, she was out of his line of fire. And if she dropped that torpedo—

Already in that split second since he had hit the light, Overby was plunging forward. The move almost cost him his life.

From the darkness to his left, Lance Carter threw lead at him. But the storm spoiled his aim. One bullet ruffled Overby's hair, another burned his neck, the third missed.

Overby hit the mud, twisted and laid a shot straight down Carter's gun flame. A strangled oath, and Carter staggered into the open. Blood was gushing from his mouth, he reeled drunkenly. But his gun kept blazing.

Lying there, Overby squeezed the trigger. A small blue hole appeared in Carter's forehead. Sheer momentum carried him forward another step. Then he fell on his face.

Three down and one to go, Overby thought crazily. He felt a little sick as he rolled to his feet. But then that was because of the *one to go*. Suddenly he remembered and his feet were carrying him at a stumbling run toward the rig.

A bullet screamed past his cheek and brought him up short. Shelia was standing near the bore hole, the torpedo propped up against the casing. There was gun in her hand. It took Overby a second to realize that she had fired at him.

He paused, uncertain, and stared at her. She was wearing levis and a blue silk shirt that clung tightly to her breasts. Her dark hair tumbled down over her shoulders from beneath a flat-topped plainsman's hat. Even there in the pouring

rain, she was beautiful and as deadly looking as sin.

"Get back, Jim," she said coolly. "I told you I'd do the job myself. I intend to."

Overby hesitated. He was close enough to see the gray eyes, dark pools now under the flickering light. Close enough to see her red mouth. And both the eyes and the mouth were cold, determined.

"Don't be a fool," he said, trying to sound convincing. "You've lost, Shelia. Slim, Mike, Lance—they're all dead. There's only you left, and you're not enough."

For an instant, she hesitated. Then she said, "Jim, you say you love me. Then prove it. Come in on this with me."

"It's because I do love you," Overby said, "that I'm telling you to get down off that rig. Before something happens."

Her laughter cut through the rain, taunting at him. "You're a fool, Jim. I've got a fortune all wrapped up in this little torpedo." She patted the three-foot cylinder suggestively. "With the Angela wrecked and Pearson broke, there will be no trouble when I bring in a well on my lease. And now that the rest are all dead, it *is* my lease. No, Jim, I'm not giving it up."

Tension built up in Overby, and a great weariness. This was it, he thought. No use to try and reason with her. Her mind was made up. She left him no choice.

"I'm coming after you, Shelia," he said, and headed for her with slow, steady strides. Twenty feet separated them, a long twenty feet.

"Don't, Jim!" The gun in her hand whipped up. "Don't make me kill you!"

Overby kept walking.

"*Jim!*" Her voice was razor thin, with something close to hysteria in it. "One more step, and I *will* kill you!"

Overby's lips tightened. He took the step—and flame spurted from the gun in Shelia's hand. Something hit Overby in the chest and raced like a fiery snake around his ribs.

The wound hurt. But even worse than the pain was the thought that raced through his mind.

She had shot to kill! Murder meant no more to her than it had to Slim Halliday. He knew now that he was right. She was evil all the way through. A strange calmness settled over him. He knew now what he had to do. Some part of him would die with her, yes. Perhaps the best part. But he had to shoot.

He brought his gun up. His hand was steady. Along the barrel, he could see her face, the black, glistening hair, the cool gray eyes, the red mouth mocking him. Slowly, almost gently, he squeezed the trigger.

As he did so, a sledge hammer hit the side of his head. His knees buckled. He went down on his face in the mud. Only he didn't know it. He didn't know anything.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wildcatters Never Die!

SOFT gray clouds were swirling around him, and he was fighting to break through them. Occasionally he tore aside a shard and caught a glimpse of pale light beyond. He wanted out of the clouds. Grimly, he redoubled his efforts, clawing until at last the light broke through with dazzling intensity.

He lay there a moment, staring about the room. He was on a bed, looking up at a pale blue ceiling. There were chintz curtains at the windows through which light was streaming. He frowned. A woman's room.

Suddenly he remembered. Shelia standing there on the rig floor, beautiful and remote as ever. The little twisted smile on her lips. Her face lined along his gun barrel. The slow, gentle squeezing

of the trigger as she pumped lead at him.

A dumb misery engulfed him. She was dead. All that he had ever loved was now gone. He wished he was dead, too, and wondered why he wasn't.

Slowly, he turned his head.

Seated patiently close by, Tom Pearson smiled at Overby. "Wondered when you was going to quit playing possum," the old man said. "How do you feel?"

"How long have I been here?" Overby tried to sit up, and was surprised that the sledge hammer had left so little pain. There was only a slight throbbing at one temple. But his ribs hurt like hell.

"Long enough for the Angela to blow her crown block sky high about four hours ago," Pearson informed him. "Bart Adams has got a full crew out there now, capping her." He grinned. "She's a gusher, Jim. We're in the money now, and ready to go places!"

Yeah. Overby's smile was mirthless. We're in the money now. We're not just two-bit wildcatters anymore. We're somebody!

All of his life he'd wanted this. Now that he had it, it was ashes in his mouth. What he really wanted was a slim girl with cool gray eyes and a twisted smile.

He knew that sooner or later he'd have to ask Tom. But right now, he couldn't. It hurt. God, it hurt. Just a little while yet, he thought. Then I'll ask.

"We lost those two roustabouts," Pearson said soberly. "But you killed Shane and Carter and that sort of evened the count. Damn you, though, Jim, you scared hell out of me when you flopped on your face. I started to shoot but she was where I could reach her."

He's trying to tell me, Overby thought. Only he doesn't know how. Doesn't the fool think I know? Hell, I pulled the damned trigger.

He looked Pearson straight in the eyes. "Let's have it, Tom," he said. "Did she —was it quick?"

The old wildcatter's mouth twitched. "She's a better shot than you, Jim. She creased your skull just as you fired. *Your* bullet damn near got me up on the forble board!"

"But I—" Overby tried to sit up. His heart was racing. "You mean she's—?"

"I mean she's more alive than you," Pearson replied.

Overby's heart turned over. Then he said foolishly, "But the well? She had that torpedo. What happened?"

"Take it easy, Jim." Pearson pushed him back. The old man was suddenly serious. "I don't reckon the well mattered much to Shelia after you fell. Because by the time I climbed down, she was there in the mud, with your head cradled in her arms, crying something about you being a fool. And why hadn't you been like that seven years ago."

Overby just stared at him.

"Life's funny that way," said Pearson. "You never know how much something means to you until you think you've lost it. On the way into town, Shelia told me she'd been careful to only crease you. But for a minute there, she thought she'd bungled the job. She thought she'd killed you."

RELIEF, worry, anger stirred up inside Overby. "What do you mean, *crease me?*" he said. "Why, that little cold-blooded devil did her best to kill me! Hell, you don't plug a man in the chest unless you're playing for keeps!"

"True," Pearson admitted. "Providing you're using something besides a pop gun for a weapon."

His eyes searched Overby's. "Tell me, Jim—what caliber gun does Shelia ordinarily use?"

Overby stared at him. "A .45 on a .38 frame," he said, puzzled. "Why?"

"Because, Jim," the old man said quietly. "Shelia shot you with a .32—a gun that wouldn't kill a kid at twenty feet!

You idiot, she made certain that if she *had* to shoot you it wouldn't kill you!"

Seeing the incredulity in Overby's eyes, he shook his head. "I'm not trying to whitewash her, Jim. She intended to blow up the Angela. And if you tried to stop her—well, that's why she shot you. But she would never have killed you. Get that through your head."

"You're crazy!" Overby said. "She damn well tried to blow my head off."

"Then tell me," said Pearson placidly. "Why didn't she use a .45, instead of a .32 pea-shooter? And then tell me why she was down on her knes in the mud crying her heart out over you. Tell me that, Jim."

For a moment, they looked at one another.

It was true, Overby thought. Shelia had known a .32 would not stop a man. Unless you hit him squarely in the head. And she wouldn't have missed if that had been where she'd aimed.. Why hadn't she killed him?

He couldn't believe that it was because she loved him. Not after the way she'd used his love all these years. And yet a desperate hope was struggling within him now, the age-old yearning of man for the unattainable.

He looked at Pearson. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know, Tom."

"Well, by god, I do!" The old man retorted. "You've got a lot of good points, Jim. But one of them is not *understanding*. Now you listen to me.

"You're like a lot of people that reform. They're likely to feel so good about what they are that they forget what they *were*. They condemn former friends because they don't reform too. But then everybody don't get religion at the same time."

He was watching Overby with those shrewd, gray eyes.

"It's sort of like—well, hit two men over the head with a mallet. You know damn well, Jim, they're both not going to come to at the same moment. It'll take longer for one than the other. Maybe one got hit harder; maybe his system wasn't quite as strong."

Overby said nothing, but he was thinking. He knew what Pearson was driving at. And more than anything in the world, he wanted to believe the old man was right.

"Jim, until that last bank job three years ago, you were just about as bad as they come. But when that teller was killed and you saw and heard his kid talking, it brought you to your senses.

"Bear in mind, though. Shelia didn't see that teller die. She didn't see the kid or hear what he said. Sure, you told her, but that's not like being there.

"In other words, Jim, you got a break." He leaned forward, his face serious. "Shelia didn't. And because she didn't, she went on being bad. As bad as you were before you changed.

"For a woman, life had given her quite a beating. And she fought back with every trick in the book because it was the only thing she knew to do. But don't kid yourself. Underneath all that coolness, she was just another scared kid.

"If you'd been the right kind of man when she first met you, you could have pulled her out of it. Maybe she didn't know it, but she was sick and tired of what she was. But you were as weak as she was."

OVERBY propped himself on his elbows. He resented the way Pearson was talking.

"Now wait a minute, Tom!" he protested. "After I broke with the bunch, I tried to get her to quit and come with me. Every time I saw her. She laughed in my face."

"What the hell did you expect her to do?" Pearson retorted. "Shelia wanted somebody she could respect and trust and

believe in and look up to as a man. Somebody to give her a feeling of security she'd never had.

"But with you giving in every time like a damn weakling, how could she have any respect for you? Or to see in you any of those things she wanted? Hell, she didn't even know that she loved you. All she knew was that you were a weak fool that she could use. And, by god, she used you! But if you'd ever stood up to her, she'd have come to you, Jim."

A dozen emotions were fighting one another in Overby now. He'd never considered himself or his relation with Shelia in that light before. She'd always seemed so cool, so arrogant, so damned sure of herself. But Pearson had showed him another side of her now.

He was silent a moment. Then he said, "Are you trying to say that when I stood pat this time, it jarred *her* to her senses, the way that teller's boy did me?"

"Yes, that's when it happened." Pearson nodded. "When you kept slogging through that mud after she'd pumped a bullet into you. When you threw down on her and squeezed the trigger. She knew then, Jim, that you'd die before you backed down.

"And then when she thought she'd killed you with that second shot, the whole thing hit her square between the eyes. It scared her. It made her hate herself for what she was. And it forced her to realize that if she kept on, she probably would kill somebody some day. And she's not bad, Jim—just off on the wrong track. The way you were.

"But the biggest thing—you showed her that you were the kind of man she could admire and respect and love, and find security with. That's what jarred her awake. Now, Jim, can you understand that?"

Yes, Overby thought. He could understand and love with a far greater love than before. Half afraid, he asked, "Has—has she left town, Tom?"

Slowly, Pearson rose. He stood searching Overby's face for a long moment. Then he said quietly, "This is her room, Jim. She insisted we bring you here. She's waiting outside now. And she's afraid, Jim—afraid that you won't understand. Her bags are all packed. She's got a ticket on the evening stage.

"Now listen to me, Jim. I'd rather she took it than to send her in here and have you break her heart. She's standing at the cross roads. It's up to you which road she takes. If you fail her now, she's finished. If you stand by her, she'll make you a fine wife. Are you big enough to understand, and to forgive, Jim?"

The look on Overby's face was answer enough. He smiled with those tolerant old eyes of his and went outside. After a moment, Overby heard a little cry and then footsteps were running toward the room.

Pulse pounding, a singing in his heart, Overby waited, his eyes fastened on the doorway.

THE END

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"Shame!" cried Mary, throwing herself between them. "Shame on you two!"

By CLARK GRAY

The Mills of the Gun-Gods

The big Swede needed a heap more than salesman savvy to keep windmills turning in the untamed, hostile wilderness of the Texas brasada. . . .

BECAUSE the land was flat, Jensen could see the twisted remnant of the windmill tower a full fifteen minutes before he reached it. And by the time he'd halted the buggy and handed the reins to Eben Smith, he knew that nothing could be done now to save the mill.

Jensen climbed out of the buggy and glanced upward at the wreck, a craggy, discouraged man with sunlight casting

strong shadows across half of his uptilted face. He could see all too plainly what had happened.

Two girts, at right angles to one another, had been unbolted halfway up the windmill tower. The girts had been tied in place with binder twine, giving the tower its usual appearance from a distance. Yesterday's high panhandle winds had put just enough strain on the tower to break the twine. The tower had twisted slightly in its fall.

The whole thing now was a mess of sprung girts, broken braces and skew legs. Jensen caught himself sighing heavily. Eben Smith's step behind him brought him out of it.

Jensen turned and began to put the necessary words together.

"She's gone, Eben. Wrecked. Might save the head and the tail assembly, and the mill pipe looks okay, but your tower's scrap."

Smith bit his lip. Smith was a little weathered cowman wearing faded overalls. "What caused it, Nels? Don't seem to me a brand new windmill ought to fold up like that."

"She was tampered with." Jensen frowned. He was a clumsy man with words. "Somebody slipped out four bolts. The tower was tied back together with binder twine, Eben."

"Tampered with? But why, Nels? And by who?"

JENSEN shook his huge head savagely. He'd been trying to answer that question for a month now. Seven other mills had been quietly and efficiently wrecked in that time. Mills that Jensen had sold and installed.

"I could guess who done it, Eben. But it'd only be a guess. Thing like this is hard to prove."

"Uh huh." Eben Smith nodded. "Anyhow, maybe that ain't important right now, Nels. I got to have water. The ravines are dry as the highway to hell. How quick can you set me up another tower?"

"Two weeks." Jensen hated to say it, but he had to. "You ain't the only man this has happened to, Eben. I got five other down mills ahead of you."

Eben Smith swore fervently. "I'll have to spread my stuff around—water from the neighbors. Nels, I can't figure this. Who're they after? You, or us little ranchers?"

"I guess it's me, Eben. I guess it's my job to stop it."

Jensen had nothing more to say, and because he was a man to whom words came hard, he remained silent during the buggy ride back to Smith's headquarters. At the ranch he left Smith, saying, "I'll have your new tower up just as quick as hard work can get it done, Eben."

Jensen rode to town. He rode the way he did everything else, squarely upright in the seat, reins clenched in his huge fists, eyes straight ahead. Jensen was not a quick-moving man, nor a quick-thinking one, and he was aware of the disadvantages of this.

Back in Chicago, he'd tried to tell that to the sales manager of his company. He'd wanted to say, Look here, I'm just a big dumb Swede. I know windmills, sure. I like them. I like bolts and wrenches and gin poles and towers. I like to put things together and make them run. But that doesn't make me a salesman, Mr. Sales Manager. Send somebody else out to Texas to do the selling. I'll go along to install the mills and keep them working. But don't send a big dumb Swede into something he won't know how to handle.

That's what Jensen had tried to say. But the words hadn't come fast enough, and the sales manager was persuasive. Jensen hadn't done so bad, out here in Texas. They were crying for windmills here. Every Saturday night for two years now Jensen had sat in his hotel room clutching a sweaty pencil stub and clumsily making

his report. Over two hundred windmills sold and installed in that time. It looked good on paper.

Jensen clattered across Wolf Creek bridge, where Will Kilbrey had his land, and he was thinking that his paper record was shot to hell by now. For the home office would have received his report of the downed seven mills.

A half hour later Jensen rode into Willow Springs. He left the buggy at the livery. He was crossing the sandy street toward his little warehouse office which stood on an alley between the hotel and the courthouse when he saw Mary Kilbrey emerge from the mercantile with her arms full of packages.

Jensen swung toward her. Mary smiled gaily across her packages, a refreshing figure of pink and white.

"Hello, you big dumb Swede. Give a girl a hand."

Jensen grinned. This was a private joke between them. He felt again the old flutter in his chest that reminded him, as always, that without Mary he would be nothing. He took the packages and moved beside her downstreet, and there was a comfortable silence until they had passed the block-long business district and came into the row of frame houses that edged the town.

Then Mary said, "You look unhappy, Nels. Why?"

Jensen glanced at her, not at all surprised now that she could read his feeling. "Another mill down. Eben Smith's. That makes eight."

"Oh." Mary clucked in sympathy. "Nels, do you suppose Charley White—no, I won't say it."

JENSEN nodded gravely. "I wouldn't say it either, Mary, without proof. Charley's my competition, sure. He sells a cheap windmill that nobody'll buy. That proves nothing."

"Nels." Mary said thoughtfully. "Charley and dad have been friendly lately. You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose your dad would hire Charley to wreck me." Jensen shook his head and grinned. "Your dad doesn't hate me that much."

At the doorway to her sister's house, Mary kissed him lightly on the mouth, invited him to call after supper, then left him. Jensen moved back uptown, the happiness of seeing Mary somewhat dulling his anxiety. But the anxiety returned when he stopped in at the hotel and saw the yellow envelope resting in his mail box.

Jensen took the telegram with unsteady fingers. It was from the sales manager.

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO, JENSEN? RUIN THE REPUTATION OF OUR MILLS? GET THIS BUSINESS STOPPED IMMEDIATELY. SUGGEST YOU DEMAND COOPERATION FROM LOCAL SHERIFF. YOU WERE SENT OUT THERE TO HANDLE ANY PROBLEMS THAT AROSE. HANDLE THEM.

Jensen folded the telegram carefully and slipped it in his pocket. He was aware of a film of sweat breaking out on his forehead. He left the hotel and crossed the square to the courthouse, his huge face cramped with worry.

The county sheriff was named McCarty. McCarty was sixty, wiry and shrewd. Jensen told him about the eighth wrecked windmill, just as he'd told him about the other seven. McCarty said wryly,

"It's not enough, Nels. Any man in the county might have done it. There's got to be a pattern, and the only pattern I can see is Charley White. You say you doubt that Charley'd have enough reason to do it, and I agree. Give me a pattern, Nels. Give me something to work on, and I'll see you get action."

Jensen couldn't blame McCarty. McCarty was doing his best. Besides, in spite of the directions from the home office, Jensen saw this as his problem, to be solved by himself alone. He returned to

the hotel and ate a somber, lonely supper.

Then he lit a cigar and went into the barroom for his one drink of the day. The bar was nearly deserted. But at one end Jensen saw Charley White with Mary's father, Will.

WILL KILBREY was big, bigger than Jensen. He wore a shabby blue denim jacket that had a ripped seam along one shoulder. He wore scuffed boots that had never seen oil. He had heavy white hair brushed back from a startlingly brown, healthy face. His only sign of prosperity was his healthiness, and a diamond ring on his brown hand.

Charley White was a little man who looked even smaller beside Will Kilbrey. White was a drifter who did his drifting from job to job instead of from place to place. White had horsy features, and there was something furtive in his glance.

Jensen had his drink. Then on sudden impulse he moved down the length of the bar toward Kilbrey and White, his huge face grave.

Jensen said, "Evening Mr. Kilbrey. Charley, a word with you?"

Charley White glanced quickly up at Kilbrey. A look passed between the two of them, then Charley grunted irritably.

"Say it, Jensen."

Jensen said, "Charley, I do not like to walk in circles. I want to know if you jimmied Eben Smith's windmill."

Charley White's thin lips came together in a taut line. But it was not Charley who answered. Will Kilbrey slammed his fist on the bar.

"Jensen, that's a hell of a thing to say. What the devil do you mean, man, coming in here and accusing a friend of mine?"

Jensen shook his head slowly. "I did not accuse him, Mr. Kilbrey. I asked him a question."

"It's the same. Damn it, for a tenderfoot you sure ride herd on this town. There's some privileges, Jensen, that a man has to earn."

Jensen felt himself color slowly. This was an obvious reference to Mary. Kilbrey had resented his seeing Mary from the first, over a year ago now. Kilbrey had stormed and threatened Mary with disinheritance. Kilbrey disliked him, Jensen knew, because Jensen rode a buggy instead of a horse, carried no gun, and had no interest whatsoever in cattle.

Jensen said now, "Mr. Kilbrey, I am going to marry your daughter. For that reason, I will not quarrel with you. I asked Charley White a civil question. I have not yet got an answer."

"You won't, neither." Charley White had backing now. He sneered a little. "Call it a civil question? I call it a damned insult!" Charley White put a hand against Jensen's arm and shoved. "Get out of my way, you stupid Scandahoovian!"

Jensen, then, being already under heavy

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strain, forgot himself. He was senstive about being touched. He was sensitive about his nationality. He slapped Charley White backhanded across the chin.

The force of the blow hurtled Charley White into the bar. White flung out a hand to steady himself, and with his other hand he fumbled dazedly at his chin, where the blood trickled from his mashed lips.

Will Kilbrey roared. "That was brave, Jensen. That took guts to hit a man half your size. Jensen, get out of my sight before I—"

Kilbrey closed his mouth tight, biting back the words. Kilbrey turned to Charley White and shoved a glass of whiskey at him. Jensen stood there a moment, his big shoulders as square as ever, but shame and remorse were digging in him. Jensen opened his mouth, then closed it over a half-formed apology. He turned on his heel.

Mary understood. A half hour later, Mary sat with him on the wooden bench in the little courthouse square, listening quietly to Jensen's clumsy sweating description of the affair. Mary could see through his halting phrases, as she could see through Jensen, himself.

Mary said quietly, "You did the only thing you could have done, Nels. Only, it will make it harder than ever for father to like you now."

Jensen nodded glumly. "Mary, your father will never agree that you marry me. Let's face that."

"Give him time, Nels. He is my father, and I love him. Give him a little more time."

"Whatever you say, Mary. Besides—" Jensen grinned faintly, "I wouldn't be much of a husband with these wrecked mills on my mind."

JENSEN was still thinking about the wrecked mills when he deposited Mary at ten o'clock on her sister's doorstep. The town had curled itself in sleep by this time. Even the saloon had closed. Main Street was a darkened valley, illumined only by reflected moonlight from the sides of the unpainted buildings. Jensen's footsteps echoed hollowly on the boardwalk.

He was approaching the dim-lit hotel lobby when he saw a figure emerge into the street's blackness. Caution touched Jensen. He hesitated in a darkened doorway. The figure swung across the street and past him. Jensen recognized Charley White.

Jensen had wondered before whether he could learn anything by shadowing Charley White. But such tactics were foreign to his nature, so he'd done nothing about it. This, however, seemed his opportunity. Jensen cat footed softly after Charley White, keeping to the other side of the street.

Charly White had a horse waiting for him in the stock pens beside the railroad siding at the edge of town. When Jensen saw this, he slipped into the livery and quickly roused the sleeping stablehand. Jensen could ride a horse. He used a buggy on his job only because it was more convenient for carrying tools. He emerged from the livery on a piebald mare just in time to see Charley White's figure dip over the rise north of town.

Jensen followed, keeping his distance. Bright moonlight lay over the land, but the country was rolling enough for him to keep Charley White located without exposing himself unduly. White crossed the wooden bridge over Wolf Creek, hoofs clattering on the planks.

Jensen led his own animal across at a slow walk. A half hour later, Jensen saw Charley White make the turn off that led to a small rancher bordering Eben Smith.

A windmill stood a quarter mile ahead of White, its galvanized skeleton glistening in the moonlight. Jensen halted in a tiny draw that just furnished shelter for the mare.

Charley White tied his horse to the

windmill leg. White climbed halfway up the tower. Jensen saw the flash of a wrench as White twisted at the bolts that joined the girts to the tower legs. The girts came free, and Jensen saw quite plainly how Charley White tied them back in place with something that looked like binder twine.

Jensen was no fighter, no hero, and so he didn't try anything fancy. He merely followed Charley White back to town. In the morning, Jensen thought he'd bring Sheriff McCarty out here to show him what Charley White had done. Jensen left the mare at the livery, got his key from the clerk at the hotel, and headed wearily toward his third floor room.

ON THE second story landing, Jensen paused a moment. Light streamed from the room he knew Will Kilbrey occupied when the rancher was in town. Low voices reached him. Jensen closed his big fist thoughtfully over his key. Suspicious, he moved down the hall.

Charley White sat in Kilbrey's room, propped back in a chair with his feet on the bed.

White was talking softly to Kilbrey. Jensen must have made a noise, standing there in the hall, because Charley White glanced up. White's horsy features twisted in guilty astonishment. White took his feet off the bed and the front legs of the chair crashed against the floor.

Jensen moved quietly on down the hall.

Jensen had a problem now. A real problem. For if Will Kilbrey was mixed up in this, if Kilbrey was paying Charley White, then Jensen had to choose between doing an honest job and marrying the girl he loved. Sweating, Jensen climbed the stairs to his room, undressed in the dark, and went to bed.

He didn't sleep. He tossed. Vague statements began to take on meaning, as for instance when Eben had said, "Who're they after? You, or us little ranchers?"

Jensen tossed and thought, and fragments of gossip he'd heard in his two years here returned to him. Jensen sat up in bed and smoked a cigar. Because his mind worked slowly, the cigar butt was cold in its ash tray before Jensen had figured it all out and decided what he'd have to do.

Jensen forced himself to lie back on his bed, but he couldn't stop sweating, thinking of Mary. It was dawn before he dropped into an uneasy slumber.

At nine o'clock, Jensen crossed the street to Sheriff McCarty's office. He borrowed a county map, which McCarty kept in his desk drawer. On the map, McCarty had roughly penciled in the blocks of land owned by the county's major cattlemen. After fifteen minutes of study, Jensen found what he'd known he'd find.

Jensen said wearily, "Sheriff, I see where Will Kilbrey used to own the land where the windmills are being wrecked. I take it he sold out to a smattering of small ranchers, but kept the best land—the creek land—for himself. Sheriff, does Kilbrey hold a mortgage over them little fellows?"

Sheriff McCarty understood. He squinted shrewdly at Jensen.

"I'm repeating gossip, Jensen. Nothing more. But Kilbrey always was a plunger. Three years ago he bit off more than he could chew, borrowed money from the bank to spread out, and then the bottom went out of the cow market. Kilbrey sold the least desirable parts of his spread, using the down payments he got to pay off his own debts. Yeah, I reckon Kilbrey does hold a mortgage on Eben Smith and the others."

"And it's been a dry year," Jensen said. "Thanks, Sheriff. That's what I wanted to know."

"It don't help you none," McCarty said. "It'd take a lot more than this guess work to make me move against a man as big as Will Kilbrey."

"I don't want you to move. I sort of

figure this as my problem, Sheriff. Thanks again."

Jensen saddled. He rode the piebald mare out to Will Kilbrey's ranch, and in Jensen there was no doubt at all now. He knew exactly what he was going to do, and he knew, too, that it might cost him Mary. But Jensen was aroused and angered at the ugly picture that was beginning to come clear.

He found Will Kilbrey sitting on his front porch drinkng a glass of lemonade. Kilbrey swung his huge body to his feet and Jensen, looking at the man for the first time as a possible adversary, was surprised at Kilbrey's size and sinewy strength.

Kilbrey grinned tauntingly, "So you took to straddlin' a horse like a man, Jensen. How come?"

Jensen moved slowly up the porch steps. For once, he did not have to search for words. He had them there, pushing their way out.

"Kilbrey," Jensen said, "I am here to settle up with you. Eight windmills. Maybe nine, if the one Charley jimmied last night falls down."

KILBREY set his glass of lemonade carefully on the chair arm. When he straightened, his face was grooved with anger.

"Get out of here, Jensen," Kilbrey spoke softly. "Get off my land, and stay away from my daughter. Or I'll have you run out of town."

Jensen shook his big head stubbornly. "I want to do right with you, Kilbrey. I know you hired Charley to jimmy those mills, and I know why."

"You're crazy man, Go on! Git!"

"I can't prove it," Jensen went on, "but I know. When you sold that land to Eben Smith and the others, you knew they'd drought out in a dry year. You thought you could foreclose and get your land back after you'd used their down payments to clear yourself from debt. You didn't figure on windmills. When windmills came along you had to hire Charley White to jimmy them. You can't get away with it, Kilbrey."

Kilbrey's mouth was white. "Jensen, one word of this loco in town and I'll—"

"What kind of man you think I am, Kilbrey? I'm going to marry your daughter Mary. I don't want to send her pa to jail. But I figure to make you pay for those down mills and call off Charley White. With my fists, if I have to."

"With your fists?" Kilbrey sneered. "Don't forget I'm bigger than you, Jensen. I'm not Charley White."

Jensen hit him. It wasn't a hard blow. Jensen didn't want the unfair advantage of surprise. He just wanted to show Kilbrey he meant business. Kilbrey's head moved sideways an inch under the blow. It couldn't have hurt Kilbrey much, except maybe his pride. Kilbrey bellowed savagely and plunged.

There was a wooden railing around the porch. Jensen struck Kilbrey hard on the side of the jaw, knocking the cattleman against the railing. To Jensen's amazement, Kilbrey bounced off the railing and came back as if he'd never been touched. Kilbrey's fists became pistons, driving at Jensen's belly, his head.

Jensen fought off the attack as best he could, but he was fighting surprise at the same time. He'd wanted to end this quickly, to do as little damage as possible to Kilbrey. But Kilbrey was a better man than Jensen had thought. Of a sudden it came to Jensen that he could be beaten.

Jensen put strength into it, then. He came up under Kilbrey's battering ram and launched a terrific blow at Kilbrey's chin. His fist seemed to float upward past Kilbrey's chest, toward the chin, but Jensen was sure it was going right, sure now this would end the fight.

Then, magically, the fist skimmed past Kilbrey's face, missing it entirely, and

Jensen was suddenly on his back on the porch floor, and he knew he had been hit, and hit hard.

Jensen blinked, shook the buzzing from his head. Will Kilbrey was leaning against the porch rail, breathing a little heavily, with a glint of admiration in his eyes.

"You're strong, Jensen, but you never learned to fight. What you say now, damn you?"

Jensen got slowly to his feet, aware of a strange shakiness in his knees.

Jensen said grimly, "I still figure like I said, Kilbrey. You aim to call off Charley?"

"You go to hell, Jensen, keep away from me. I'll kill you this time."

Jensen shook his huge head stubbornly. The buzzing still persisted in his ears. He began a lumbering unsteady advance on Kilbrey. But at that moment the screen door slammed and Mary was somehow there between them, her face flushed with anger.

"Shame!" Mary said. "Shame on you two. My two—two men! Fighting!"

Mary cupped her face in her hands and began to sob.

JENSEN had seen women cry in his time. His mother, sisters. Jensen had never been able to take it. And now, glancing at Will Kilbrey, Jensen saw that Mary's father couldn't take it either.

Kilbrey's brown handsome face took on a look of helpless bafflement. Kilbrey stepped gingerly forward, touched Mary's shoulder.

"Honey, you don't underst—"

"Get away from me!" Fiercely Mary flung off her father's hand. "You knew I wanted to m-m-marry Nels. You didn't have to fight him over some silly old windmills."

Kilbrey looked hopelessly at Jensen, and in the glance Jensen caught an appeal. There was no more animosity in Kilbrey now. Later, perhaps. But now they were two big men trying to comfort an unhappy little girl. Jensen grunted and stepped forward.

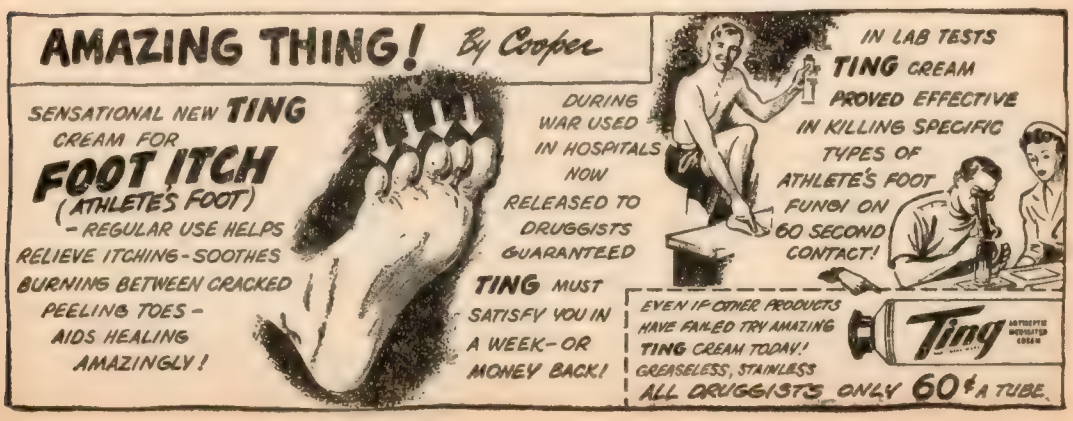
"I started the fight, Mary," he said ruefully. "But it was that or send your pa to jail."

"You send my dad to jail," Mary threatened between her sobs, "and I'll—I'll snatch you baldheaded, Nels."

Jensen felt himself redden, but the stubborn knowledge that he was right pushed words out of him. "Mary, your dad was wrong. He hired Charley White—"

"I know what he did. I heard you through the screen door. And I won't stand for it, either." Mary wheeled savagely on her father. "Dad, you pay for those windmills. You hear? And you call off Charley. If you don't, I'll marry Nels tonight. And we'll go to M-M-Mexico or someplace."

(Continued on page 127)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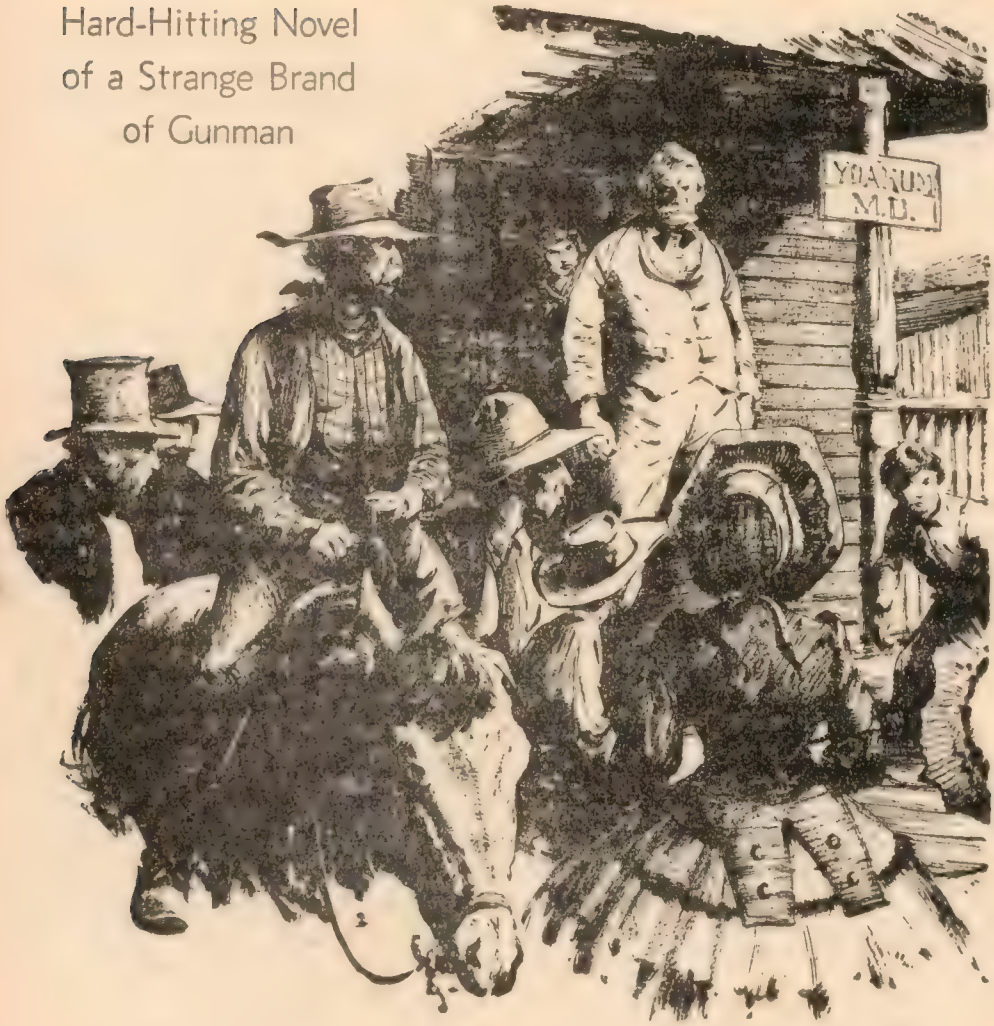


CHAPTER ONE

"A Charge of Murder!"

CUTTING ACROSS the Frio bottoms as he rode toward Mesquital, young Cocky Roach unexpectedly came upon the little ranch. It had not been there four years ago, and something about it caused him to rein up. Sitting his *sabino* pony in the brush's edge, he studied it at length, while the cast of his lean features turned grimmer by the moment.

It was a neat outfit, showing signs of hard work and ambition. Stout pens, the whitewashed 'dobe under a water elm, a handful of cows—everything about it gave him a familiar tug. This picture prac-

FANGS, LAWDOG!

By PAUL L. PEIL

Quick, gentle hands lifted Thad Cobb's slack body from the bed and carried it inside.

Like all reckless, hell-for-leather men, Roach was good with his guns. But did he have the speed, the stamina—and most of all, the cold-blooded patience—to meet the hard-eyed range hog who had told him: "Haul iron, or haul freight!"

tically could fit over the one he'd been carrying in his memory's eye these past few years. Except, that spread over on Pecan Creek had belonged to him.

The bitterness blazed through Cocky, and when finally it burned itself out, the cold, resolute purpose again filled the void. Swinging his pony toward the wagon track that ran like a ribbon through the curly grass, he abruptly checked up. From the opposite side of the meadow something had kicked sunlight into his eyes. With gaze narrowed, searching, he sat motionless until once more he glimpsed it. And now he tensed like a coiling rattler.

It was a portion of carbine barrel, thrust through foliage of a *coma mota* a hundred yards distant. Automatically, because it was a finger of death pointing at the ranch house, he flashed another look that way. Two men were emerging from it, moving toward the pair of horses in the yard. Cocky's glance flicked over one of them, to fasten tenaciously on the other.

And all the hatred, dammed up within him for four interminable years, suddenly pounded at him for release.

That second man was Tom McCabe, Mesquital's long-geared, rear-backed, side-winding sheriff in person. Roach could see his jaws working in conversation with the other man, and he thought: Still the same old split-tongued magpie! Then the silver star on McCabe's vest, glinting like a heliograph in the brassy sunlight, snapped Cocky back to immediate reality.

He knew this for what it was—ambush! And he felt his every instinct protest, yet he continued to watch, held paralytic by his own mental storm. Tom McCabe, damn him, had it overdue! In a few seconds Cocky would see the very job that he'd come back to do, done for him by someone else.

The dry-gulcher was partly visible, on a bended knee, with .30-30 lined, just waiting for the range to lessen. Cocky, waiting too, could hear the thud of the horses trotting onto the road now, and in his mind he had it figured to a fraction when the carbine would dead-center its first blast.

Then it broke within Cocky Roach, something purely reflex, over which he had no control. He was plunging his speckled pony into the open, charging headlong. His hand was inside his shirt, dragging the .44 Colt from its Hardin hideout holster. Savagely he began shaking out loads.

The bushwhacker, startled though he must have been, proved a cool customer. He fired, and kept on firing, at the oncoming pair, placing three shots before he whipped the Winchester around on Cocky. From the corner of his eye, Cocky was aware of an end-swapping somersault by one horse in the trail. Two bullets fanned his face as the *sabino* swerved for a pear clump without slackening speed. The next instant he was at the motte's edge, literally on top of the sniper.

He left saddle in a flying leap, and the man, scrambling frantically, too late, went down under his weight with an explosive grunt. The report of Cocky's last shot was muffled in the man's belly.

RISING SHAKILY, Cocky stared grimly at the crumpled figure. "Well, Ramsey," he said thoughtfully, "you won't swim any more herds on dark nights for the Yuppurs." A slow, suspicious frown crossed his features as he repeated the name: "The Yuppurs. My-me, I wonder if this was their hand that Ramsey was playin'? If so, I've done queered myself with my only friends!" He shook his head in denial. "No, they're hardcase, but they wouldn't deal 'em short-card like this!"

The frown persisted however as he turned and went, deliberately unhurried, up the dusty road.

Tom McCabe knelt over the form that was sprawled beside a dead horse. At Cocky's approach, he lifted gray eyes and

laid them in solemn regard on the cowboy. He was tall and rangy, this star-packer, with a mien of utter dejection at present. Yet there was unquenchable fire in him; it was merely burning low now. In contrast to his saddle-hued skin, the hair that showed from under his Boss Stetson was a salt-and-pepperish. Last time, Cocky recalled, it had been black as the hat.

Roach, not nearly so tall, had a quality that couldn't be submerged. It was in his manner, in the constant balance of his wiry body, a wariness akin to distrust. The unhealthy pallor of his skin was accented by his dark eyes, darker hair. Despite his shabby apparel, he seemed self-confident.

During the elastic interval wherein they simply appraised each other, Cocky's sneer was openly contemptuous. Yet the sheriff, speaking first, betrayed nothing by either tone or expression.

"Thanks for buying in, Roach. That jigger really had us in a split stick! Where'd you happen from?"

Cocky's voice was frosty with venom. "Straight from Huntsville, where you sent me four long years ago. Remember? An' don't start dog-lickin' over me. I didn't take chips for any personal reason. It was just a snake-blooded set-up—an' besides I didn't recognize you."

"Of course not," McCabe agreed, by his inflection turning the barbed lie on Cocky, and added, "And he shot at you too."

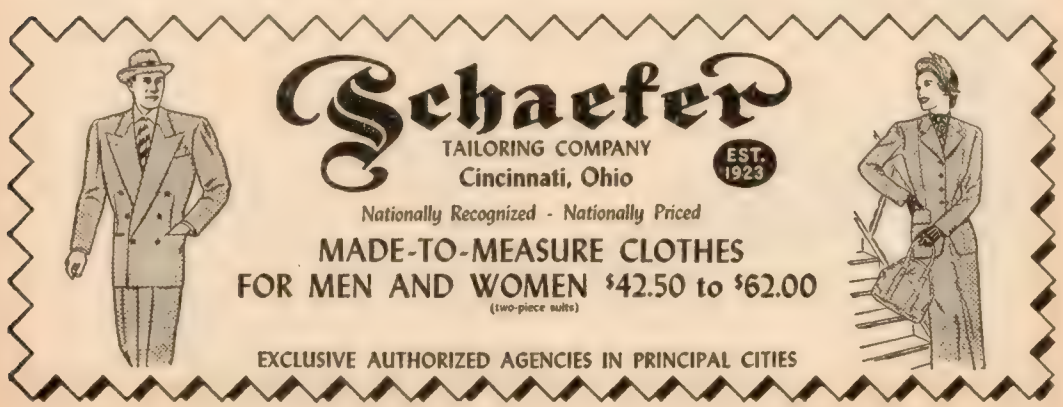
Infuriated as always by this lanky lawman, Cocky felt himself whipped about by the cross-currents within him. He backed off, goaded yet restrained. McCabe was suddenly busy with the wounded man, who was writhing and groaning.

Belatedly observing the latter, Cocky saw that he was youngish, clean cut in appearance. His shirt front, a blood-wet expanse, was being tripped rather awkwardly by McCabe, who said, "He's bad hit, Roach. I'll need help getting him to town."

Cocky snapped instantly, "Tote y'-own prisoners! He's probably some innocent ranny you've jobbed up on, who'd do better to kick out right now than suffer a dose of your sanctimonious law-twistin'."

Tom McCabe's control broke its bonds momentarily, like a tied-down cow might abruptly bolt and run its rope's length before being thrown again. He stood. Though his glare held on Cocky, his voice was toneless. "Sorry that's your attitude, yet I'm not surprised. He's no prisoner, and his life may be spilling out in that dust. But you june along, Cocky-boy. I'll make it all right."

Cocky swallowed hard, exclaiming sullenly, "Why didn't you say you got winged?" For during McCabe's crouching posture, his right shoulder had been ob-



scured. Now as he stood, his crimson-stained sleeve and his dangling arm were evident. Cocky strode forward. "Here, you're losin' blood y'self! Let me get a tourniquet on that, quick."

When he'd finished with McCabe's injury—a nasty crease, not too serious—Cocky put the arm in a sling. Then they both went to work, feverishly, on the other victim. His chest wound was a horrible, ragged tear of flesh and bone.

Finally stanching the blood flow, they contrived a temporary compress. Sitting back on his heels at long last, Cocky Roach thought of Ramsey, that bushwhacker who, despite distraction, had been such a craftsman!

THERE was a buckboard at the ranch, but no horses. These, McCabe said, would be in pasture a mile away. Lacking time they pressed his bay and Cocky's flaky roan into harness duty. Cocky deposited the unconscious man in the bed and climbed in also, taking his cheap stock saddle. The sheriff gathered up reins and they started townward.

Passing the *coma* motte McCabe caught Cocky's nervous glance. He said, "Can't bother with that skunk. He'll keep. The buzzards won't have him." His lips had a bloodless edge. "Who was he—Bige Ramsey or Seguin Sam?"

"Ramsey."

The horses went at an easy Spanish trot, neither slow nor fast, threading through the green mesquite and black chaparral. Silence closed in upon them, like the wicked brush around them. Presently Cocky broke the palpable oppression, asking, "Who is this hairpin?"

"Thad Cobb of the Anchor A."

That was the largest ranch in the brasada, and Cocky pondered before asking more. "Whose *ranchito* was that back there?"

"Jim Brewster's. A saddle pal of Thad's. Been building that iron for several years, until he was killed last month. I was taking Thad in for the murder trial tomorrow. He's my chief witness, my ace in the hole—unless he cashes in now." He sighed wearily, audibly. "Mesquital was figuring on quite a holiday. Lot of county folks were arriving when I left this morning."

He lapsed quiet, wrapped in a grim contemplation. Shortly Cocky's whetted curiosity bested him. "Whose trial?"

Sober of face, McCabe said, "An old friend of yours. Nip Yuppur."

Up on his knees, Cocky leaned on the back of the seat, tipping it. His intent gaze bored into McCabe. "Nip Yuppur—murder? My-me, aren't you bein' the optimist? Buckin' a pat hand like the Yuppur brothers!"

McCabe gave him a sidelong, speculative look, without seeming to note his antagonistic smirk. He continued, "People seldom change, Cocky, but other things do. Circumstances, men's luck, towns. Take Mesquital. Remember its saloons and casinos almost every other door, and Susie's sporting house right in the middle of Texas Street?"

"Sure. That's the way us brush-poppers like it."

"You'll find it different now There's a line of cleavage. The Yuppurs and their element have been pushed to the south edge of town. Texas is a respectable street, and we aim to make that other part a scab town, a *chihuahua*. We can't wipe it out entirely, can't change human nature. But we can influence that nature by showing our youth what that kind is—scurvy, degraded."

Roach put a deadly disgust in his words. "Wouldn't be you, if you weren't bluenosin' an' shovin' somebody around!"

McCabe was looking straight ahead. "It's the will of decent people making Mesquital their home, not mine. You've been away four years, so look around and see how the odds have changed."

"Odds!" exclaimed Cocky. "You ought to know that odds never mattered to me—*tin-badge!*"

McCabe nodded without turning his head. After a pause in which some of his stiff-backed tension eased, he said, "I know that, and I'm not worried about you, Roach."

Something about his remark jolted Cocky harder than a blow. The inference, or lack of it—it could mean scorn, trust or threat.

"*Pues, pues,* so you've popped a big whip!" Cocky gripped the seat's back as he laid his raw contempt into the sheriff. "Cleaned out all us small fry, goin' after big fish at last. A regular he-wolf. Well, lay back your ears an' show your fangs—an' see how far I run from you."

Tom McCabe said no more as he shook up the team.

HAVING grown much, Mesquital was still a typical town in the brush. A mixture of adobes and frames that always looked weather-beaten, regardless of newness. Thickets encroaching on cleared lots. The windmill with its clacking dry rods. Familiar sights revived memories in Cocky, making him realize how unconsciously hungry he'd been for this scene.

That was bad, and he fought it. For he was practically an outcast now, and after he performed the chore he'd so long held in prospect, this town would be too hot for him. He'd have to dust, far and fast—but the pleasure would be worth it.

The buckboard's entry along the main drag attracted major attention. People crowded up, staring, jabbering, following. Cocky studiously avoided their glances, not trusting himself. He remembered what had been in their eyes before, the censure, the dislike. And if he needed up-to-date confirmation, he had that in the whisperings he caught:

"What's Roach doin' back?"

"Another Yuppur gun, likely."

"Didn't he threaten McCabe to high heaven when they sent him up?"

"Hogwash, he'd need to be twins to take on Mac!"

Cocky's countenance darkened. It was simply more pitch thrown on his flames of hate. He'd shown them his contempt once, when they'd tried to keep him down in the dirt. He'd shown them again by hitting hard, where it would hurt the most, in the guts of their tin-god sheriff.

Doc Yoakum's cottage was on the other side of town. When McCabe halted alongside its neat palings, Cocky jumped to the ground. Sullenly indifferent, he moved aside as quick yet gentle hands lifted Thad Cobb's slack body from the bed and carried it inside.

Dragging his saddle, Cocky stripped the *sabino* from harness, began rigging it up. McCabe, talking with two deputies at the gatepost, watched him quietly, then came over. Cocky scowled.

"Thanks again, Roach. Drop by the office later. Want to see you."

"What for, more gab?"

There was a weary patience in McCabe's voice. "Maybe I can help you, Cocky. A fellow has to eat, got to have a job."

"Yeh, an' don't some folks take the stinkingest kinds to make that livin'! Thank you, I'm not interested."

He spun the speckled horse, rising into leather as it turned. Going along the crowd's edge, he pulled up and hipped around when McCabe called his name with a peremptory sharpness. The lawman was not one to grandstand. He came over now, and his tone had dropped level again, though flat with authority.

"This much, Cocky: Don't sail under false colors. Get rid of that armpit Colt—or wear it open."

With that he walked away, through the gate, toward the house. And Cocky, with hard-faced composure, rode at a fast-running walk back along Texas Street.

Appraising the changes, he remembered when this town had worn its hair on the outside, when a vaquero could come in from the pear and howl at the moon. McCabe had certainly curried Mesquital into a sleek, docile thing. It made Cocky feel lonely, and that reverted his thoughts to the Yuppurs.

He cut down a side street, seeking the Brasada Bar.

For those brothers were a bridge across four hell-spent years. Perhaps they were extreme in their direction—so was Tom McCabe in his. Cocky had seen them come up, shady, ruthless, opportunists. What of it? From experience he knew that was the only formula for this dog-eat-dog country.

Moreover they had been the only ones to offer him aid when his going had gotten tough. No matter how unsavory their character, they were his friends, and maybe he could pay off some of that debt now. It looked like they'd hit a bumpy stretch. Nip, at least, with that murder charge.

Cocky knew what McCabe did with murder charges.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble-Making Son!

THIS BRASADA BAR, unlike its main street predecessor, was not large nor bustling with trade. Ordering whiskey straight at the plain pine bar, Cocky decided the early afternoon hour, coupled with the excitement outside, accounted for the slack. He drank solemnly, poured a second, which he was lifting to lips when he saw Yermo Yuppur in the backbar mirror.

Yermo stood in the doorway of his office, studying Roach's back. On his long-slanted face was an expression that struck the cowboy as oddly, definitely unfriendly. Yet as he crossed over, he sponged it from his features, blanking them. Leaning sideways against the counter, at Cocky's elbow, he stared steadily at the latter, without speaking.

Cocky, with an intuition pricked, downed his drink before turning, to appear surprised. "Hi, Yermo," he said, and felt a shiver of revulsion from the bleach-eyed appraisal. "It's good to see you."

"Is it?" asked Yermo, and he had a voice that rasped along Cocky's spine. "Odd way you show it. Riding in with Tom McCabe, and I also hear it that you saved his hide. It don't make sense."

"You always had a fast grapevine," Cocky said, and called to the bartender for a second pony. When he shoved the bottle to Yuppur, Yuppur let it set. And now Cocky fidgeted under the cold, unblinking stare. At last he said vehemently, "I dunno what possessed me, Yermo. I hate that law-whelp more 'n I ever thought I could hate anyone—still I couldn't watch him get potted like a clay pigeon. I'm sorry it was Bige Ramsey I paunched."

Yuppur's thin nostrils dilated with silent breathing. "Being sorry won't clean up the mess you've made of things."

Staring fascinatedly into those almost colorless eyes, Cocky shuddered. They held the deadly glints of killer lust. "I had no idea it was your game, Yermo! *Sin duda*, you know how I stand."

This was a different Yermo, Cocky realized. Not that he, or Nip, had ever been other than stem-winding tinhorns. The vicious streak had been in him then, but not as raw and ragged as it was now.

Yermo said, "Do I, slick-ear? I wonder. I don't relish having men I've befriended foul up my rope. Why'd you come back anyway? Mesquital is poison range for you."

Cocky brooded a long, dark moment over that, and his answer was dredged up from a deep residue of bitterness. "You know how I slaved my guts out, all by my lonesome, buildin' up my spread. Then get jobbed an' lose it an' spend four years in hell, for a crime I didn't commit. Penned

up, pushed around, a scabby hound's life. Well, I lived every hour of those four years on hope, lookin' forward to this day. You should know why I'm back, Yermo. I came to collect a bill."

At first it escaped Cocky Roach, because long since had his senses been dulled by his hate. When they did sharpen, he fastened a puzzled, searching regard on Yermo. Yermo, who stood so stiff, out from the bar's edge, with right hand slid inside his tailored cutaway. He carried a nacarado derringer there, Cocky recalled.

Yermo asked, "Meaning what?"

Despite his alerted attention, Cocky couldn't free his mind from its tentacles of obsession. His reply was automatic. "A star don't give a fellow the right to brand an' boot another into the culls, does it?"

The calculating quality of Yuppur's slow grin made it mirthless. About him was a thoughtful laxity as he produced a cambric handkerchief and dabbed at his high cheekbones. Turning, he poured himself a drink.

And Cocky stood with a bit of guilt, thinking, He wasn't pullin' a gun. He's jumpy, an' I'm jumpy. *Cascaras*, he's havin' his fur rubbed wrong, too.

Raising his glass, Yermo looked at Cocky. "Bend an elbow, slick-ear. I know how you feel. Maybe we can help each other."

DRINKING with Yermo, Cocky Roach had the abstract feeling he'd entered a smoky room, the details of which should be familiar, yet were hazy with fumes. Dangling in his memory were tag ends he couldn't quite pin down. It rendered thinking difficult, and added to it was the effect of this liquor on his empty stomach. Conscious of Yuppur's peculiar stare again, he fumbled for conversation:

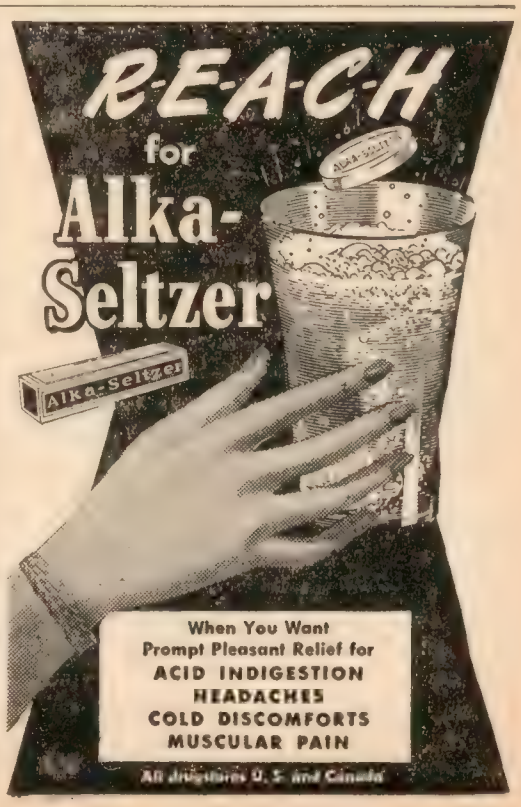
"So the mighty McCabe has whittled on you."

"He thinks he has. This place—" Yermo shrugged— "is just a front, serving me as a springboard. I've bowed to the will of the jackrabbit rabble who've squatted in the brush, sure." His tone took on a razor edge. "But I've come a long way while you were gone. Nearer my goal than ever. When I'm the king-cutter, I'll thin out the thickets, and cut the ground out from under any scissor-billed, cock of the walk sheriff who gets in my way."

"Power to you," said Cocky. "Tell me, how'd he hooley-ann Nip?"

Once more Yermo shrugged. This time it struck Cocky as callous, and thinking back, he recalled how Nip, the mean, stupid one, had always obeyed this crafty, older brother, like a loyal hound. It was an affection totally missing in Yermo.

"You know Nip," explained Yermo. "His brain's in his trigger finger. We held notes on Jim Brewster's place. Nip went out to collect an overdue one. They had words. Nip claims Jim drew first. Anyway Jim winds up dead and Nip near-



dead. McCabe appears, johnny-on-the-spot, and latches onto Nip."

Looking blankly at Yuppur, Cocky visualized a little ranch in the Frio bottoms, another on Pecan Creek. Twins almost, both desirable. And it occurred to him that he was luckier than Jim Brewster. Turning, he studied the whiskey on the bar, suddenly needing it.

He asked, "How does this Thad Cobb fit in?"

Yermo said, "I wouldn't know," and Cocky instinctively knew he lied. He caught the throaty tautening of Yermo's voice. "Gossip is that he's McCabe's ace surprise, that he can put my neck in a noose. I'm taking no chances. Remember the tricks that law-dog pulled on you? Hog-tied you and whipped you around a stump, didn't he? Well, he's kept this Cobb under cover until today. This was my first crack at him—*and you spoiled it*!"

He touched Cocky's shoulder with a long finger, and the cowboy recoiled as from a jabbing gun muzzle. Yermo went on, slowly, "That, slick-ear, leaves you only one way of squaring yourself."

The smoke began billowing in Cocky's brain now. "By finishin' Bige Ramsey's chore?"

"Exactly!"

Flames licked around Cocky's thoughts. His mouth was dry, a sponginess that no liquid would relieve. His own voice sounded remote, as he stalled for time.

"Maybe I've nothin' to lose, but what do I gain?"

"You're in no spot to dicker. However I'm your friend, and fair. I'll need a *mandador*, a top henchman who savvies cows, for the Mexico end of my plans. You're it. You could earn enough to buy a nice li'l spread down there, if you had the notion."

For a timeless space Cocky stood silent, while temptation gradually molded him into its mood.

Yermo said impatiently, "Don't be a fool. You're bust. Nothing but a one way, smoky trail ahead. You played it level once, got choused out of the herd by a ring-tail bull. Cold deck or not, this is your turn to deal!"

"An' win," Cocky said, nodding like a man in a trance. "Throw in a workin' stake, Yermo, an' you've sold a bill of goods."

Yuppur's grin, though broad, was still spurious. "*Seguro*, can do," he agreed, clapping a hand on the other's shoulder as be bellied to the bar. "That calls for a tall snort, about three fingers in a mule's ear. For I'm mightly glad you see it my way."

COCKY THOUGHT of the last time he and Yermo had "tall snorted" it —over four years ago, when things had been much different. Recent graduates from petty cow-camp gambling into their first establishment, the Yuppurs were hard and ambitious, resourceful. These qualities Cocky understood, having had no picnic of life himself.

Orphaned before reaching his teens, he'd been roustabout, wrangler, puncher. Saving his wages, adding thereto by brush-popping or any other job that paid off, he'd aimed for a substance that had been denied him by parentage. When a break came, he shrewdly was ready, buying a choice watered section on Pecan Creek. For three years he slaved, building his brand, and just as he came into voting manhood, got his head above swimming water.

He hadn't made friends, as hardly any scrapping youngster does, but a greater compensation had been his. *The girl*, Marlita of the neighboring Coes, had answered right to his long deferred question. So on this particular night, with a marriage license in his pocket, he had reason to celebrate.

All this was changed the following morning. Mesquital was prematurely roused that dawn by pistol chatter along

Texas Street. The first arrivals on the scene observed a fleeing figure, found Jeb Quarles, an influential stockman, sprawled dead, shot twice from behind. Farther upstreet they discovered a well-known ivory-butted .44, with damning empties. Several hours later Tom McCabe located its owner, Cocky Roach, sleeping limp-rag drunk in the hay loft of the town barn.

That was Cocky's finish. He had clashed with Quarles over graze rights—for that matter, with everybody else in that scope of 'squite, over something or other. Engulfed in trouble, he sold his outfit to Yermo, the only buyer who presented himself. This modest sum hired a lawyer who talked Cocky's neck out of a noose, yet couldn't overcome prejudice and circumstantial evidence.

The jury didn't leave the box.

OUTSIDE the saloon, Cocky paused on the duckwalk, rolling a cigarette as he tried to reorganize his disjointed thoughts. His eyes narrowed when he saw coming toward him what appeared to be a delegation of townspeople. It was led by Judge Sam H. Bone, spindly-legged in his slant-heeled boot shoes, barrel-chested in his black alpaca coat.

In his usual pompous manner, as if about to render a decision, the Judge drew up before Cocky. He had a penetrating gaze, and right now his bulbous nose was sniffing, picking up Cocky's alcoholic taint. Cocky snapped his mouth shut. "Roach," Bone began after clearing his throat, "the decent citizenry of Mesquital has appointed me spokesman to—"

Fury broke over Cocky. "Hobble it, Mr. Bigwig," he cried. "I'm way ahead of you. I'm a trouble-makin' son, one of the gun-breed. Y'-all don't desire my contaminatin' presence in your so-o respectable town. Well, I'm here. Don't push me around. I booger easy!"

With that he defiantly stalked past the nonplussed Bone and the natives, who seemed more sheepish than indignant. Down the walk he went, tugging his hat lower against the sun glare, his brain chaotic. Deciding he needed food, he scowlingly stamped into the Elite Cafe. Perched on a stool, cookery smells assailing his nostrils, he decided again he wasn't hungry. Ordering java, he drank it black and slowly and when he emerged into the side street, he did not see Bone and his crowd.

Retracing his steps, he climbed on his speckled horse and aimlessly nosed it about. In him was no conscious purpose, only a growing sense of the enormity of his pact with Yermo Yuppur. It was a killer's pact, and he, Cocky, was no killer. Long ago, in periods of uncertainty and self-searching, Cocky had convinced himself that he had not gunned Jeb Quarles during some blank spot in his memory.

The events of that night were not too lucid, but it would have been a physical impossibility with him. Not a drinking man, he had been so limber-legged that Yermo and a faro dealer had bodily supported him to the wagon yard. Yermo, he remembered, had piled him into the hay. And McCabe, finding him later, had helped him shamble to jail, where he'd immediately gone back to sleep. Cocky hadn't been that fleeing figure, and Mesquital knew it. They'd simply enjoyed his downfall, damn 'em!

He had threaded around to the edge of town, and now when he swung down to hunker beneath a spreading *ratama,* he had a view of Doc Yoakum's cottage across the dusty way. Men loitered in its yard. A deputy on the gallery kept watching Cocky. The sheriff must be inside, for his bay remained tugged to the buckboard by the fence.

Cocky smoked, and kept telling himself not to be a crazy fool. String along with Yermo, who always had an ace in the hole. Down below the sleepy Rio he could make a fresh start. Scruples loaded a man

with grief, and his conscience he'd licked when he came back here to settle with Tom McCabe.

McCabe came out of the house, his tall figure conspicuous as the waiting men gathered around him in conversation. Unaccountably, Cocky rose, taking a step forward before checking up. His hand delved inside his shirt, drawing the Colt from its hideout. Thrusting it inside his waistband, in plain sight, he started walking, leading his pony by ribbons. At the gate he halted, waiting for McCabe, who presently came toward him.

Cocky had been ill at ease with Yermo, his best friend, glad to leave him. At this moment, again facing the man he hated most, he had a feeling that was paradoxical, something easy, almost lacking in rancor.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Warrant

AVOIDING McCabe's steady glance, he said, "You haven't got that wing fixed up yet."

"Doc's busy with Cobb." McCabe's voice was tired, fever showed in his bright gaze. "I'll get it washed and dressed at the office."

"How is Cobb?"

The lawman shook his head. "Bad. Drilled twice, one slug embedded. It's causing a spinal pressure which Doc says must be relieved quick. He's not confident he can do it."

"*Pobrecito*—poor fellow! What next?"

"We've wired Rio City and Santone. Maybe we can get a specialist in, by tomorrow, if it's not too late."

If he doesn't pull through, Cocky was thinking, it will simplify my job. He said, "I mean the trial. It's off?"

"Not necessarily. We've enough evidence to hang Nip Yuppur. Cobb was a surprise package, a stone I aimed to kill two birds with." Downcast, he went out to his bay, began unhooking it from the vehicle. Cocky had moved with him, and as he unharnessed awkwardly with one hand, McCabe talked on.

"It proves we all make mistakes. For a week I've kept Thad hid out right there at the scene of the crime, on Yermo's property—property he hasn't had the guts to take over yet. Then, like a shorthorn, I fall for this ambush."

"Maybe Yermo's smarter than you admit. I'll bet you that Cobb never leaves Doc's house, alive."

McCabe paused, regarding him intently. "The part of this job that never grows old is the gambling, Cocky. My wits and my savvy against another man's. It's a short game when one party wins all the pots." He grinned, wan, friendly. "I don't tilt the bottle often, but if you'll join me, I'll set them up."

The old antagonism was sparking through Cocky, stiffening him. "Drink alone, McCabe. I wouldn't be seen with your scummy likes even in a greaser bar." He turned, flipping split reins over his pony's neck.

Behind him, McCabe spoke, gently. "Don't behave like a green bronc, Roach. You fight a rope that never touches you."

Cocky half-twisted, leaning against the *sabino's* shoulder. "So you still sermonize." The sarcasm gave way to raw accusation. "I was doin' fine until you started ridin' me with a spade bit. You had to bust me, railroad me, because I wouldn't take your old-man-with-a-beard advice."

McCabe's tone remained gentle. "Having people make personal issues of their troubles is the part of this job that's always old, son. Take yourself. Since you were a *sancho*, a bow-legged leppie trying to wobble alone, you've had a cocky streak. It helped you buck a hard world and get ahead. It also helped hog-tie you when trouble landed on your back. You went sour, threatening me till the air was blue.

I hadn't done anything. Only because I wear a badge, you hung your hate on me. I'm merely an instrument of society, who makes the law, and it is above personalities."

"The hell you tell it. You hazed me in particular. For maverickin' on Anchor A; for cleanin' out Mex Joe's that time; for stringin' a throw-back at my own waterhole."

McCabe said, "You were outside the law in each case. Anyway, that's all past. You ought to forget it, start fresh."

The slow shake of Cocky's dark head was as grim as his taut features. "Forget four years of livin' hell—an' the rotten deal that sent me there? No. I'm goin' to wipe that slate clean."

Abruptly weary, McCabe shrugged. "Your privilege. As a colt, you had a lot overlooked. You're grown now, and if you haven't learned your mistakes, you'll pay for your bad decisions."

Turning his back on Cocky, he moved to the buckboard seat and became interested in his saddle beneath it.

COCKY mounted and sat waiting at length for McCabe to turn again. Finally he asked, calmer, "Is it a secret why Cobb's such dynamite?"

"Not at all," the sheriff said over his shoulder. "Nip killed Brewster, but Brtwster didn't sieve Nip. Yermo did that, from the yard, as Nip came into the door. Cobb, visiting Jim, was in the tack shed, saw it. Yermo dragged Nip inside, making it appear the two had shot each other."

Cocky snorted. "Then what 've you got on Yermo? Just a shooting that could be accidental."

With an effort McCabe was lifting the kak. Noting his weakness, Cocky kneed over, took the saddle from him and dropped it across the bay's back.

McCabe said, "Maybe. Nip's dumb and loyal. I've kept Yermo away from him while I softened him up. I think he'll crack right down the middle when we prove Yermo plugged him. Then plenty beans should roll out of the bag."

Cocky fidgeted his horse. His thoughts were going around in an endless procession. Unable to find further speech, he brusquely wheeled and rode off, out of town, into the rolling sweep of thorny 'squite.

Tom McCabe was a smooth whelp, always bent on tripping someone. He could talk a backslider through the Pearly Gates. What had Yermo said about Nip: His brains are in his trigger finger? Was that the reason he'd sent Nip on the mission, hoping to eliminate him?

Brothers did fall out, and someone—why, hell, it could have been that Cobb—had nearly got by with a twin kill there in the Frio meadows. Twice, figuring Bige Ramsey's play. The pattern kept repeating itself.

Evening breezes were ruffling the brush top in wavy, sea-like contours as he swung down in a *huisache* clump for a breather. He was utterly tired—it was from his mental, not physical, conflict. Smoking as he sat on his heels, he studied the direction he'd unconsciously taken.

It led to the Coe ranch, which was located between his former place and Jim Brewster's. It came to him that if Yermo Yupper had that middle section consolidated with his flanking ranches, he would possess a small grass kingdom.

The stricken face of Thad Cobb, the helpless fool who'd been suckered by fate, whose trust in a badge had poised him on a grave's brink, was before Cocky as he rode again. Gradually he supplanted it with another image. Marlita's. And some of the drawn agony left his face.

She'd vowed she would wait forever. In the bitterness of prison, he had written and released her from it, ignoring her later letters. Now he had to see how she felt, even if it meant stirring ashes. For he

had a future of sorts. Mexico could mean happiness. He thought of Yermo with gratitude, and McCabe with scorn. That star-packer couldn't whiffle-stitch Yermo.

IT WAS NEAR sundown when he returned to town, his gaze hard, his manner rigid. The change in Mesquital struck him the moment he passed Doc Yoakum's darkened cottage. There were no loungers present, no deputies. Texas Street seemed deserted, with shops unlit or closed. Here and there were furtive movements, and he glimpsed watchful figures in doorways and windows.

Reaching the side street, he heard the revelry coming from the Brasada Bar. It was a blaze of light in the dusk, with the tie-rail crowded. Frowning, he slip-knotted his spent *sabino* to an awning post and entered. For a second as he stood with batwings swinging behind him, he saw the attention whip to him, the slight break in hubbub. This bunch was expecting somebody.

At the end of the bar, which three aprons were tending, Yermo stood in the midst of a convivial group. Cocky went through the press toward him. Yermo grinned wider and gestured as Cocky came up, and Cocky detected an amusement in that display of white teeth.

Cocky said, "Want to see you a minute," and his tone registered with Yermo, who grinned on, but went squinch of eye.

Yermo gestured again. "Have a drink, slick-ear." When Cocky started to speak, he continued: "I'll see you later. Busy right now being a host."

He glided away, and Cocky watched him seek out Seguin Sam and another owl-faced gunnie, talking low with both. Then he circulated amongst the capacity mob, and Cocky matched Sam's stare. Sam snapped it off first, though Cocky knew the yellow-eyed killer was marking his every act thereafter.

Someone jostled Cocky, saying, "Bottoms up, man. Yupper likker is the finest. Tain't often y' get this chance."

Cocky scowled. "Why the high-jinks?"

The other peered at him. "Ain't y' heard th' news, Roach?"

"What news?"

"I'll be— Hey, Roach ain't heard about Thad Cobb kickin' th' bucket. Where y' been, Roach?"

"Prob'bly hittin' the hay," another put in, "at th' wagon yard." His laughter died instantly as Cocky swung a glare on him.

Like a tortured horse, being spurred savagely and held in at the same time, Cocky tried to feel elation. He wouldn't have to finish that poor devil now. No, for after a fashion he'd aleady done it. Back at the ambush, when hate had held him paralytic, giving Bige the margin for murder.

A whiskey was thrust at him. He took it. "When did it happen?"

"Ol' Doc passed the word couple hours ago. Most everybody who was in town for the show tomorrow has pulled out for home. 'Cause there ain't goin' to be no surprise shindig. I reckon Yermo has a right to treat the whole town to an open house." Cocky's lack of enthusiasm didn't deter him. "An' this'll tickle your funny-bone, boy. He even sent an invite to Sheriff Mac, and Mac, he says he'll oblige, if possible, around eight. Yermo has a bottle of Old Crow ready for him. Goin' to be som'p'n, ain't it?"

Cocky tossed off his drink. "Yeah," he remarked drily and strode off. Yermo was in a far corner, near his office, and Cocky joined him before he got away. "I'll have that word with you, Yermo," he said. "In your cubbyhole."

Yupper hesitated, his glance calculating, then complied, following the cowboy into the private room. He said irritably, yet caution was within him: "What's prodding you, Roach? You should be toasting Cobb's untimely kick-off. It isn't

pleasant, you know, to dress out an invalid."

Cocky drove to the point. "You better explain howcome the Coes are gone an' their range full of 2Y cows."

Yermo's lids were narrow slits. "For the same reason my cattle graze your former grass, slick-ear. I own it." His smile was a smirk.

"Not enough, Yermo. I want to hear more."

YUPPER suddenly laughed, so soundless it wasn't audible above the barroom noises that came through the partly opened door. "I remember, you had your stake rope on that Coe filly. Keep your hackles down. I didn't stampede her out of Texas. She's around town, doing I don't know what. Her folks were really hard-luck champions.

"Rustlers began hitting Coe. He trailed some down into Mexico, didn't come out. Miz Coe, trying to run the ranch, went busted. When she passed away last year, I acquired it. Had a plaster on it, but I'd been most lenient."

"Of course," Cocky agreed, noncommittal in tone, in feature. This smooth and ready summary was what he had expected. "Why did Mr. Coe, a top-grade cowman, come to you instead of the bank?"

"I explained, rustlers had him groggy. Too bad a risk for the bank, presumably." He canted his head, and his voice was a scratchy purr. "I'm tolerating this inquisition only because it's you, Cocky."

"Sure. I just wondered. Knew you, bein' my friend, would tell me." Odd feelings were threshing through him, disappointment, regret and a strange relief that dissembled theme. There was something else he must find out, for certainty's sake. "You're not sore, are you! *Seguri-mente,* I'll make you a good gun-hand."

Yermo snapped, "That deal's off. You can't shut Cobb's mouth any tighter, and I have McCabe eating in my hip pocket. The pendulum was due to swing. He made a laughing stock with this bob-tailed stunt." Ramming his hands into slanted pants pockets, he said smugly, "Sorry, slick-ear."

"But, Yermo, what about the Mexico job?"

"Oh, that! I— We'll talk about it another time. I'm busy tonight."

His last words sounded loud, and recognizing the reason for it, both glanced toward the door and the barroom beyond, which had become vibrantly quiet. A man, Seguin Sam, appeared in the portal, looking at Yermo and jerking his ugly head over a shoulder, backwards.

Yupper stiffened unconsciously, then relaxed. With a grin that matched his swagger, he left the room.

Cocky followed to the door and lounged against a jamb.

The saloon was a hushed pool, its stagnant surface rippled only by the casual movement of a figure toward the bar, through a lane that automatically had opened. Tom McCabe exuded a calm sufficiency as he drew up, put a foot on the rail and glanced about, questingly. His wounded arm hung at his side, the sling discarded. He was not one to trade on being crippled. Observing Yermo, he waited until the latter joined him.

He said, "Evening, Yupper."

Yermo's complacence was a gloat. He almost bowed. "This is a rare honor, sheriff. You're practically a stranger down here, perhaps I should introduce you around."

McCabe's gray gaze flicked over the crowd. "No need. A number of your guests have browsed up my way recently. Your grog must be strong stuff."

"It is." Yupper was enjoying this moment. He motioned to a barkeep. "The sheriff's special, Tony."

McCabe studied the bottle that Tony produced. "This your brand, Yermo?"

Yermo's shake of head was painfully

solemn, provoking snickers from the tense watchers. To Cocky it brought a keen perception that here, between these two men, antithetic types, the pattern of power in the 'Squites hung in a balance. A gun balance. And his attention was sharply split between them at the bar and Seguin Sam, who had posted himself at a point that covered the lawman's back. Sam was deriving no mirth from this by-play, only a hopeful expectancy.

McCabe, tipping the Old Crow, was saying, "If you'll sell me a quart of your preference, Yermo, I'll keep it in my office for you."

"I don't aim to visit you soon, McCabe."

"Never can tell. You may, maybe after the trial. It's like this: I have a document in my safe, signed, legally attested and tied in pretty ribbon. A deposition is the proper term, by Thad Cobb. I'll show it off tomorrow."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Owl-Faced Triggeroo

YUPPER went ramrod stiff. "It wouldn't be admissible! Our lawyer—"

Tom McCabe said, "Judge Bone presides. We'll let him decide that." He downed his drink, while Yermo stood immobilized beside him. Wiping mouth, he grinned. "Umm, that wasn't so bad. Hate to drink and run, Yupper, but I must. See you in court. *Buenas noches.*"

He departed as casually as he'd entered, leaving a lion bearded in its own lair. For a full minute afterward the saloon was graveyard quiet. Yermo didn't stir, his bleach-eyed stare fixed on the empty pony beside the bottle. Seguin Sam, now that the moment had passed without him receiving a signal from Yermo, stood nervously twitching his twin holster edges.

And Cocky likewise felt reaction. His fingers slid off the handle of the .44 in his waistband, and he suddenly craved a whiskey.

Yermo finally moved. He said tonelessly, "Stand them another round, Tony," and strode toward his office. Almost dragging Cocky inside, he closed the door. Instantly his wall of poker-faced reserve showed cracks of pressure from anger, frustration, desperation.

He rasped, "We've got no time to waste, Roach. Get me that paper tonight."

"Why me?" countered Cocky. "Our deal's off. You boss a passel of toughies. Let them."

Yermo's head jerked up. "If they did, you know it would back-track to me." He sensed the alteration in Cocky and was puzzled. "You've got a score against that stinking illegitimate, and you're washed up around here. Do it, and you can fog out with a nice nest egg, for I'll up the ante."

"I dunno. Maybe I realize I'm just a scrub gunnie, not a simon pure killer like Sam."

"Hell, you scotched Ramsey!"

Cocky scratched the back of his neck, watching Yermo. "Oh, I snuck up on him while he was shootin' at somebody else. An' old Jeb, I shot him while I was pie-eyed drunk. I'm thinkin' I'm not such a much."

The other's anger wasn't improving with suspicion. "You're trying to jack the price. All right, name it. I'll pay."

"It's high," Cocky admitted, and asked thoughtfully, "You want me to spring Nip, also?"

Yermo snarled, "I don't care what you do with that lump-head—just get me that paper."

"Okay, okay," Cocky said, and although he smiled, there was frost in his dark eyes. "Now trot out some green stuff an' start countin'. I'll tell you when to quit."

As he hesitated, vicious hatred was

naked in Yermo's regard and speech. "I won't forget this, Cocky. I'm your best friend—never thought you'd treat me like this."

With a twisted smile, Cocky said, "Neither did I."

Seguin Sam

The barroom was orderly, its crowd thinned, when Cocky passed through it. A damper had been put on the festivities. He still wanted a drink, but refrained. Outside, he paused in velvety gloom to roll a cigarette with slightly shaky fingers. For a last time he had to re-assay his decision, knowing that now—with money in his levis and a reasonable chance for success—he might be making a mistake.

This town had given him roughage, tried to keep his nose in the dirt. It came to him that a man fought for anything worth while and was strengthened by the fight. The cold lump in his stomach was gone, and he forgot to light his quirly as he went resolutely toward Texas Street.

A GLASSED-BOXED lamp burned there on the corner, and a figure stood nearby, biliously yellow in its sickly glow. Cocky recognized him and did not atatempt to avoid him. The man moved forward when Cocky came abreast.

He said, "If you're out for a stroll, Roach, I'd like to talk with you."

Cocky said distastefully, "Leave me be."

"No, young man," Judge Bone asserted, "I'll have my say. Why don't you wise up? Take the chip off your shoulder. You possess certain admirable qualities."

Cocky snorted. "That's not what you told me once."

Bone nodded. "Except for Tom McCabe's sake, and Marlita's, I would have sentenced you the limit. They believed in you, and you owe them more now than disappointment. For example, this afternoon Mesquital was proud of you for busting up that bushwhack. I was trying to express the public sentiment when you went haywire."

It took a space for Cocky to digest that. He exclaimed, "Well, don't rub it in." He meant it one way, had it accepted in another.

The Judge said, "You insolent punk!" and acted surprisingly fast. His punch exploded on Cocky's chin, knocking the props out from under him. Looking down, Bone added, "I've wanted to do that a long time, Roach."

He melted into shadows while Cocky sat there, the blow forgotten, the words echoing in his brain. When he arose, a sort of pride touched Cocky's countenance, for a void had been filled.

Slanting across the street, he entered the squat adobe that housed the sheriff's office and jail. As he stood with eyes

adjusting to the feeble light that a single bracket lamp shed over the room, McCabe spoke to him.

"Bad habit to stand in a door, Cocky. Come over and sit."

He slouched in a tipped-back swivel chair along a far wall, his long legs dangling. His black Stetson lay in his lap, partly covering a hand that rested there. Absently, he seemed to watch the darkened corridor that led back through the cell block. Cocky went over, perching himself on the edge of a desk, and an awkward silence began building up.

McCabe said, "Thanks for the watch you held on Sam, down at Yermo's."

"I— Sure," Cocky muttered, and then his miserable confession came tumbling out. "I'm sorry, sheriff. I been a damn fool, makin' one mistake after another. I couldn't help hatin' you."

McCabe eased in. "That's all right, son. It was like a fever, had to run its course. No harm done."

"If I were you, Tom, the way things have shaped up—" he studied the square safe in the corner— "I'd call in my deputies an' lock up."

"My deputies are riding to Rio City. When Doc Yoakum broke up the party this afternoon, and a lot of folks started homeward, Jubal Jones had a wagon he wanted delivered in Rio. Very important cargo. The boys went along as an escort."

The incongruity of that pricked at Cocky. It was dumb, he thought, when McCabe might need every gun in town.

"Come in, gentlemen. You're a little earlier than I expected. I trust you found the back door unlocked.

YERMO YUPPER, Seguin Sam and the owl-faced triggeroo filled the mouth of the dark corridor. The gambler was grinning, his long and thin face resembling a death's-head in the dim light. He was empty-handed, but the other pair held leveled sixguns.

He said, "Hate to interrupt your chinfest. However this won't take long. Your friends are sure clumsy in staking out a watch. We had no trouble sneaking past them."

"Yermo," Cocky snapped, with a desperate hope, "this is my job. Don't you have confidence in me?"

"Hardly, especially when you leave your bronc tied at my place. What were you planning for a getaway?" He laughed, and Cocky knew the jig was up. He suddenly knew something else, too. McCabe had a bared weapon, under the hat in his lap. Cocky had caught the dull shine of its snout. He was thinking fast as he listened to Yermo continue:

"Hell, slick-ear, I was stringing you all along. You might 've had guts enough to settle with McCabe. Since you didn't, I can still do my own dirty work. You'll both be found here, gunned down, and who'll know you didn't kill each other? You're enemies."

"Like Jeb Quarles an' I were?" Cocky asked. "That made it simple for you to lift my Colt the night you packed me off to the barn, leavin' it on the scene after you murdered Jeb. Simple like that?"

Tom McCabe's chair made the tiniest squeak. Cocky heard it, and it told him McCabe was tensing, bracing his feet for action.

"Took you a long time to figure it out," Yupper was saying. "Well, we've talked enough. In about two minutes some of my boys will start blowing the lid off down my way. In their noise, we'll finish you both. But first, I want a couple articles. A document from you, sheriff, a roll of green stuff from you, slick-ear. You can lead off."

He came forward, cautiously, with an outstretched palm. It was his fatal mistake. Cocky's hand made a reluctant motion toward his pocket, then flashingly dropped to belt level, dragging his .44. After that, Cocky had no clear conception

of what happened. His mind was concentrating on one thing, the rise and fall of the gun prong under his thumb.

The room rocked and roared with the thunder, and filled with powdersmoke. Yupper's white, stricken face floated in the midst of the smoke, and Cocky kept firing at it, until it vanished.

He spun, was on a knee. With the reek of cordite strangling him, he slipped into total darkness.

Everything was dazzling white when he came to, and the smell of antiseptic surrounded him. With a painful effort he squirmed up on an elbow and surveyed his situation. He was in Doc Yoakum's, in a sick room. McCabe, a bandaged figure in a chair beside him, said, "Easy, Cocky. You're patched up with everything but baling wire."

"Did we—"

"Sure, we did—got 'em clean as a whistle." He glanced up when old Doc came in, thrusting a yellow telegram at him. He read it, beamed and held it toward Cocky. "Good news, son. The medics in Rio City claim Thad Cobb has a fair chance to recover."

"Recover!"

"I forgot. You see I realized he was a dead duck, one way or another, here in Mesquital. You admitted that much yourself. So I had Yoakum run a fib, and during the following reaction my boys got Cobb out, unnoticed, in a wagon along with the crowd.

Cocky stared at him in admiration. "Cobb was bad off. You stringbean galoot, I'll bet you never even got a deposition from him."

"I don't remember. By the way, I tried to toll you up to my office all day yesterday. There's been so much paper work lately, I had to get an assistant. Someone you should meet." He raised his voice. "Hey! Come on in."

The door opened slowly, to frame the prettiest picture Cocky had ever seen. He sat bolt upright now, and as she walked toward him, they both spoke.

"Cocky."

"Marlita!"

Cocky Roach knew that at last he'd outlived yesterday. Or rather, it had become today, and today would blend into a tomorrow that was bright with promise.

THE END

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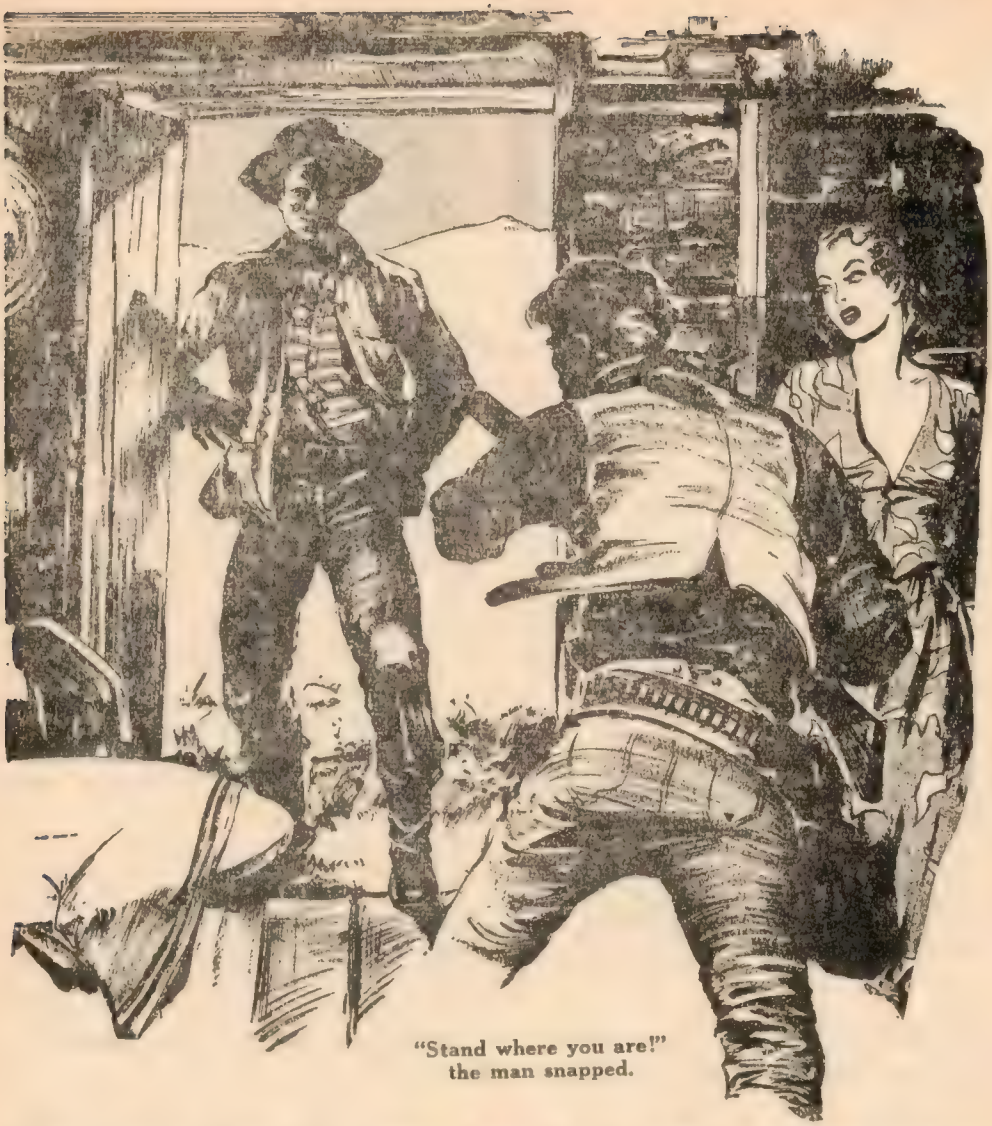


"Stand where you are!" the man snapped.

THE QUITTER

By WILL C. BROWN

OUT in the Caprock dusk a coyote howled again and Matthew Cooper felt his mustang sidestep nervously. A low black shape swooped past and disappeared, buzzard or late-roosting crow, and in its ghostly wake the prairie breeze tilted the broomweeds

In that small, tightly barricaded room lay Matt Cooper's salvation—and his destruction. . . . Would he meet it now with courage and determination — or trade a sudden, brave death for an eternity of living hell-on-earth?

like an unseen hand brushing the whiskered face of desolation.

Matthew spurred the mustang. Tonight, his hated decision was made. He would break the news to Marlie—tell her that they were whipped by the land.

Lamplight made a lonesome color in the cabin window. He penned the mustang and before he went in he took a range man's look at the weather. Overhead the night was thickening. He sniffed the fresh bite in the new wind and heard the wintry stir of the yellow willows down at the dry creek. First bad norther could be in the making.

Matthew pushed the door open to the feel of good warmth from the cookstove and the smell of frijoles boiling. He stiffened rigidly there, a tall man afoot, one thin boot inside his house, his dark eyes narrowed against the lamplight and the alien thing he saw across the silent room. His brain was playing tricks.

Insanely, for a moment, it was as if his thoughts back there on the trail, about the vicious land, had made it materialize somehow in evil human form, that the ugly, menacing thing inside was the Caprock itself come to life to confront him in living malice. One of Matthew's hands came up very slowly and his calloused fingers touched his chin stubble in disbelief, but he hardly knew he made that movement.

A burly, heavily-bearded man stood across the room. He was slightly crouched, holding a raised shotgun. Through a hole in his matted beard a tongue came snake-like to lick nervously at cracked lips. Matthew's eyes were forced down to the shotgun and he tried to lock his gaze there as if he might by eye-strength alone hold back the thick finger on the trigger.

"You stand where you are!"

The crouching bulk had not moved. His words came out like boots crunching in dry gravel.

Matthew's hands stretched high. He dragged a look to the side of the room, sensing her presence there, feeling steel-trap tension for the question that pounded blood into his ears. She was standing well back, against the wall to his right.

"You all right, Marlie?"

There was fear in her wide eyes. But she looked steady. He saw her nod.

"Don't do anything, Matthew. Don't try to do anything—just stand still." It wasn't like Marlie's voice—he knew the trembling fear clutched in her throat.

Coarse gravel crunched again behind the black whiskers. The red eyes whipped back and forth.

"Woman—you go get that gun off'n him!"

For a second, he thought he would try for the Colt at his hip. But gave it up as quickly. Not with that shotgun on them, and Marlie there. He felt her trembling fingers when she loosened the .45. He watched her step cautiously to the table, place the gun there, saw the crouching man take it to him and shove it inside his waist.

Matthew said quietly, "Be careful with that shotgun—it's a thin trigger."

"Shut up!"

The red eyes blinked at them for a long time. Matthew heard Marlie clear her throat.

"He's—Blackie Filbro."

NOW he remembered. The whiskers, the drooping eyes, and a sort of unnatural paleness had baffled recognition at first.

"You got sent to prison, Filbro."

"Yeah. But I ain't there now."

"Why'd you come here?"

Marlie spoke then. "He just walked in and grabbed that gun. He escaped from Huntsville penitentiary, Matthew. I think it was just accident that he came this way and sighted the cabin. He said he's headed for the New Mexico line."

"You come to our place a-purpose, Filbro?"

"I ain't forgot the wagon train, if that's what you mean."

Matthew tried hard to keep his fear for Marlie out of his voice and eyes.

"Listen. You can get a horse here. And grub. You can be a long way gone by morning."

Filbro blinked at them, keeping the gun raised and cradled. Somehow he looked to Matthew like a man who had been drugged, or who was dead for sleep.

"I ain't in no hurry!" Filbro leered.

"You do anything to us—they'll hang you when they catch you." Matthew felt sweat on his face, a thickening of his tongue as he groped for logic. "You'd be smart to keep moving, Filbro."

"One more wouldn't make no difference. I already stabbed a guard to get this far. Never thought you'd see me again, did you, Mr. Ohio?"

"Listen, Filbro, I'm willing to help you if you'll leave us."

The red eyes burned mockingly. "Ain't jealous, I reckon, are you? That's a mighty proud filly you got there!"

Matthew struggled to keep his voice down. "You bother a woman, it's not like killing that Split-O boss. You know what they'll do to you—before they hang you."

"You talk big," Filbro snarled. "Now you can't do a damn thing. I ain't forgot you beat me up."

Matthew steadily eyed the thick, stubborn features, saw the heavy cruelty in the man who somehow embodied all the inherent viciousness of the Caprock spaces.

"You were sneaking at Mrs. Cooper's wagon."

"I wasn't doin' no harm! Everybody's always rode me. That Johnson ain't gonna ride nobody again. You ain't either!"

He was eyeing Marlie sullenly, not Matthew. Then his eyes drooped and he seemed to reopen them with effort. He's dead for sleep, Matthew thought. He can't go on till he's had sleep. That might be good. Or it might be bad. This was an animal he was dealing with, and who can fathom an animal's mind?

For a while there was no sound except the wood burning in the stove and the beans simmering in the chipped granite pot. So this was the man who had murdered the Split-O foreman, Ace Johnson. Matthew remembered—he and Marlie had heard about it soon after settling on the Caprock two years before, when they were still fresh in their confidence and in their determination to get a homesteading foothold in the boundless Texas rangeland.

Filbro had been a trouble-making no-good who had joined up with the wagon train on the journey West from Ohio. All the women had been afraid of him. Once, returning from a night hunt, Matthew had walked up on a figure slinking at the wagon where Marlie slept. He had flattened the man in a bloody fight, learning next day it was Blackie Filbro.

He had never seen him again but Matthew had learned later that Filbro had come on West, landed a job as a hand at Split-O. Then he had been knocked down one day by Ace Johnson in an argument, had made an ambush of Johnson the same night and shot him dead. A Panhandle posse had finally cornered Filbro and a jury in the court at Amarillo had given him life imprisonment.

"The beans," Marlie said quietly. "I've got to take them up before they burn."

Filbro nodded. "Fix me a big plate of everything. Some coffee." He raised the shotgun. "Don't you move, Cooper. You try anything, and I'll let her have it—first!"

PRISON, the long hours of thinking, of crafty planning, it made a man develop animal cunning. Matthew thought.

Filbro knew how to do it. He brought the shotgun to the table, backing Matthew and Marlie to the far corner. He ate wolfishly, gun across the table, muzzle on them, hammer back and tirgger only inches from his right hand. No man would try anything desperate with a scattering shotgun load across the room from him—and his wife.

I should have pulled out of this cursed country months ago, Matthew thought. Before this happened. Marlie hates it. *We can't make the grade. It's too big—it's like hell.*

Filbro wiped his hand across his bearded mouth.

"I got to have sleep," he muttered.

"How'll you manage it, Filbro?"

"I'll show you."

He backed to the door of the leanto bedroom. "Bring that lamp, woman. Cooper, don't you try nothing!" He kept the shotgun on them. Marlie advanced with the lamp, Matthew following. Filbro backed to the door of the little storage closet Matthew had built of lumber scraps. Its partitions went to the dark gloom of the ceiling.

Filbro hurriedly examined the insides, saw no weapon, and then moved across the room. Marlie put the lamp on the dresser.

"Git in there—both of you." Filbro motioned to the closet with the shotgun.

Marlie moved to obey. Matthew stayed her with a grasp at her arm.

"Wait a minute." He spoke with a desperate effort. If Filbro managed somehow to hold them prisoners through the night, then tomorrow . . . Matthew felt it was his final effort now. "Listen, Filbro, we haven't got much. I've had a lean time. I'm leaving this country. You take all we got. We'll head out and not look back. Now—tonight."

He felt Marlie stiffen under his grasp. He could not bring himself to look at her. It was tomorrow he was thinking about. Tomorrow, after this Filbro had slept.

"*Leaving,* Matthew?"

"We're licked anyhow, Marlie," he said hoarsely. "Our herd's scattered and dwindled. No more credit for grub at Inman's store. We're done for. I was going to tell you tonight."

"You mean we're—that you're giving up, going back?"

"We can't make it another winter," he repeated doggedly. "The land—this country is no good. Like him!" He jerked his chin savagely at the red, crafty eyes behind the shotgun. "You know you're fed up with it too, Marlie. Going hungry, having to do without."

"I haven't complained, Matthew."

"This country is like a death sentence," Matthew said vehemently. "I was crazy to ever bring you out here. We can't stick it out another bad winter, even if we have to lose everything we've put in it."

"Then at least," she said quietly, "Filbro has a little something on us. He's *fighting* his death sentence."

"He's trying to get away, too," Matthew retorted miserably.

"Yes—he's running. The land whipped him. Only in another way."

"Shut up!" Filbro muttered. He mouthed out suddenly, like a man near panic. "It's killin' me! I ain't slept for three days and nights. I'm a-goin' to sleep in that bed and you ain't a-goin' to out-talk me, mister. Now you-all git in that closet."

AS IN a nightmare, all of Matthew's struggles with the raw and hard-bitten Caprock seemed to come together in life in the hulking, threatening man with the shotgun. Filbro, from across the room, again seemed to take on the living form of all that immovable, unpitying land.

He wanted to claw into Filbro, to batter him down and tear at his guts with his bare hands in all his pent-up frustrations

and setbacks. He knew his utter helplessness to do it. And there again, it was like the impregnable Texas space a man couldn't get at.

"You ain't just gonna be locked in there," Filbro grunted, fishing at his sidepocket. "You gonna be like a bird in a spring trap."

He held the shotgun on them with his right arm, and pulled out a tangle of twine. He motioned again, and they crowded backward into the closet, squeezing in among the boxes and hanging garments.

"You lookee at this!" Filbro ordered. "When I shut that door I'm gonna tie one end of this string to the handle. Then I'll run it through the hook on the wall and around that dresser leg, there. To get angle pull at the back of this shotgun. Then I'll pull 'er tight and lay the gun across a chair. Aimed right at that closet door. I'll uncock it and tie the string tight to the trigger and cock it again. No slack. Then I'll sleep in that bed. You move that door a inch, it'll blast you both to sausage."

Now the living Caprock, as a final step of taunting conquest and contempt, had invaded his house, to desecrate his and Marlie's room, their own bed, their private lives. Matthew's burning hate may have shown in his eyes. Filbro suddenly tightened his hand on the gun.

They sat crouched on the floor. There was total darkness when Filbro kicked the door shut. Marlie's head went down to Matthew's shoulder and he felt her tears wet his shirt. He heard the heavy movements outside. He knew when Filbro worked the string around the dresser leg, heard him adjusting the gun on the chair, and, finally, Filbro's heavy weight sagging the mattress and springs.

A slice of night air bit through a crack in the closet wall. The norther had hit. Already the tormented sound of it was rising and eating between the blanks and into his bones, and Matthew thought of it as the Caprock struggling to reach him even in his death trap.

"He's asleep already." Marlie's strained whisper was in his ear. He could hear Filbro's snoring. "Matthew, what are we going to do?"

"Nothing we can do," he muttered dully. "That buckshot charge is dead on us—it might miss and it might not. We can't touch that door."

"I didn't mean that. I mean—what you said about giving up, leaving all we've done. Is it because of me?"

Then he knew that was the real reason, that all the time it had been because of Marlie, the way the frontier had heaped her with hardships and privations. Alone, he could have stuck out the lean homesteading years, until he got a foothold with his herd. But with Marlie having to endure it—he felt his own sense of guilt for bringing her there. The rising norther whooped a triumphant scream.

"Yes, maybe that's it, Marlie. This country's not fit for a woman."

"Then if that's all, Matthew, we'll stay," she whispered fiercely. "We can lick this Caprock yet. And the first way to start doing it is to fight it back—and lick that stupid big animal out there in our bed."

"You mean you haven't been wanting to go back, secretly?"

"I didn't come West with you on a round-trip ticket. I was travelling on a marriage license."

THIS was what he had wanted to hear, and for a long minute he let her words restore warmth in him. In his heart, then, he knew full well how he had been tasting terrible gall at the thought of giving up, of crawling, defeated, back to Ohio.

And here, prisoners in their own house, cold and cramped in his own storage closet, with a quick-trigger shotgun on

them and a thick-headed brute of a killer dirtying their own bed, the truth bit hard into him. It wasn't that he had been afraid he was no match for the silent land. It simply had been that he was afraid for Marlie.

Blackie Filbro

"You're the damnedest woman I ever heard of," he whispered.

"I take that to mean you've reconsidered."

"Yes. I've reconsidered, I reckon. Tomorrow I'll try to drive those cows away from that sink hole, maybe shoot us a buck for fresh meat. I'll try to jawbone old John Inman again for grub credit. If we can only pull through till we can sell the calf crop next year."

"There's always *some* way, Matthew."

"Yeah. Now for a way to get that Blackie Filbro out of our bed and down to the marshal at Estralita."

"That's rubbing you, isn't it, Matthew?"

"What? How to get Filbro to the marshal?"

"No. Never mind." She clasped his hand hard. They were silent for a long time. The norther's edge whittled at the clapboards. From Marlie's movements, he thought she had her head back, was looking upward into the darkness overhead. He looked up, too. Marlie noticed his movement, and whispered, "Sometimes in this country you have to look up, Matthew, to find a way. We ought to remember that."

"Yes. Yes, I guess you're right."

"It's not boarded—you ran out of planks. Those shingles are not so strong."

"I can't reach 'em."

"I can. Get me up on your shoulders."

For a long, painful time, he held her as she toiled in the darkness overhead. Braced with one hand against the closet wall, Marlie worked patiently at the shingles with her free hand, tearing them out in little splinters when she could, hammering them with her fist when they would not split.

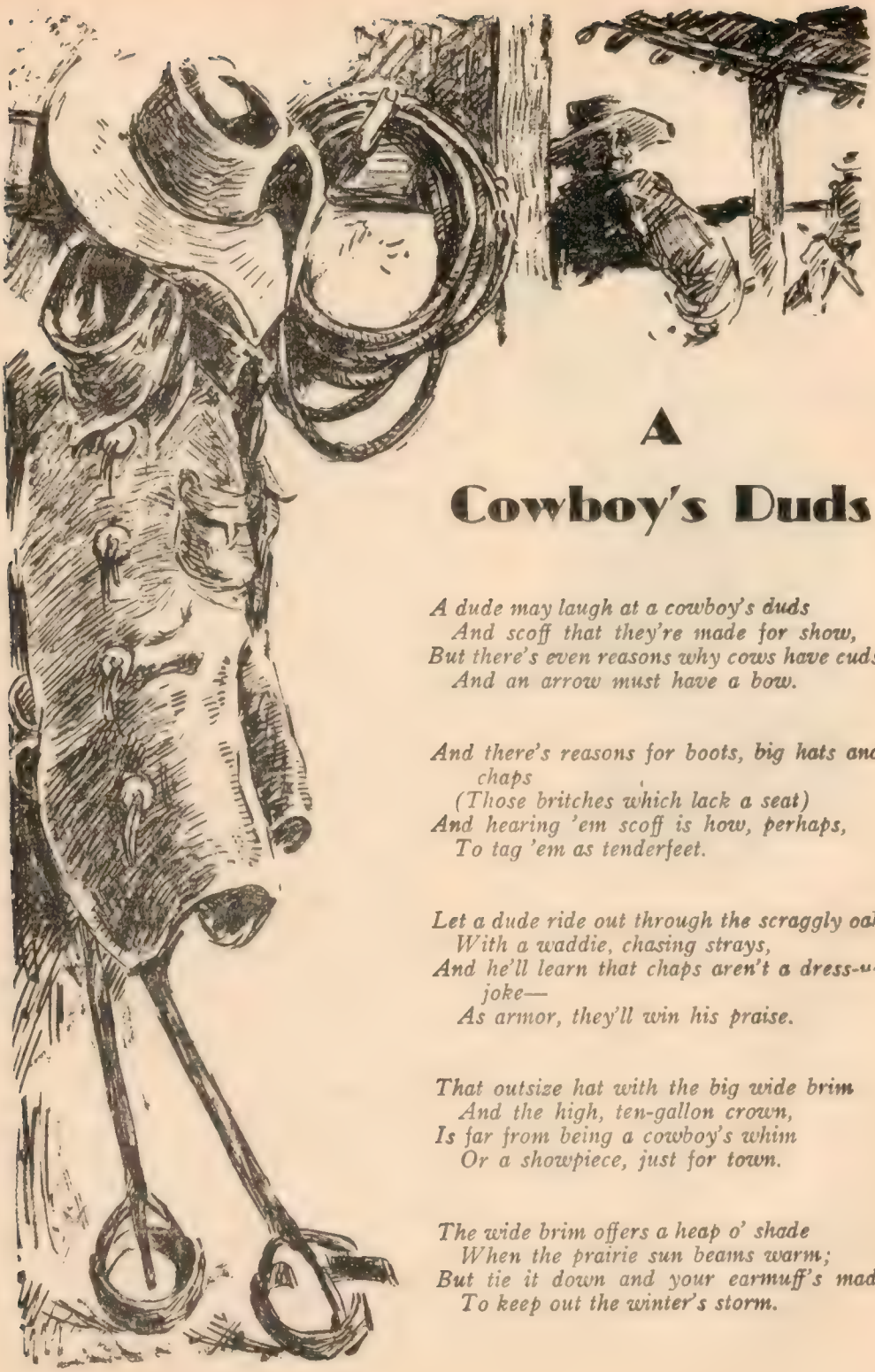
For once, a norther was good for something. He felt thankful that the noise of it, the rattle and gusty voice of the wind, would keep the sounds from the snoring Filbro. And at last, he could see the outlines of the jagged little hole in the roof, feel the icy intake of air. It was enough for him to get his head through—his shoulders would tear out the rest.

Cautiously, he lowered Marlie, tensely bracing against the wall to keep from touching the fatal door. He reached for her cold fingers, feeling the fresh blood on them, and she lay exhausted against him for long minutes.

"Steady me now," he whispered. "Give me a hand under my foot, high as you can lift, till I get a hold. Then you get back from the door and lay flat."

He scrambled awkwardly out the hole, the jagged edges taking little shreds of

(Continued on page 126)



A Cowboy's Duds

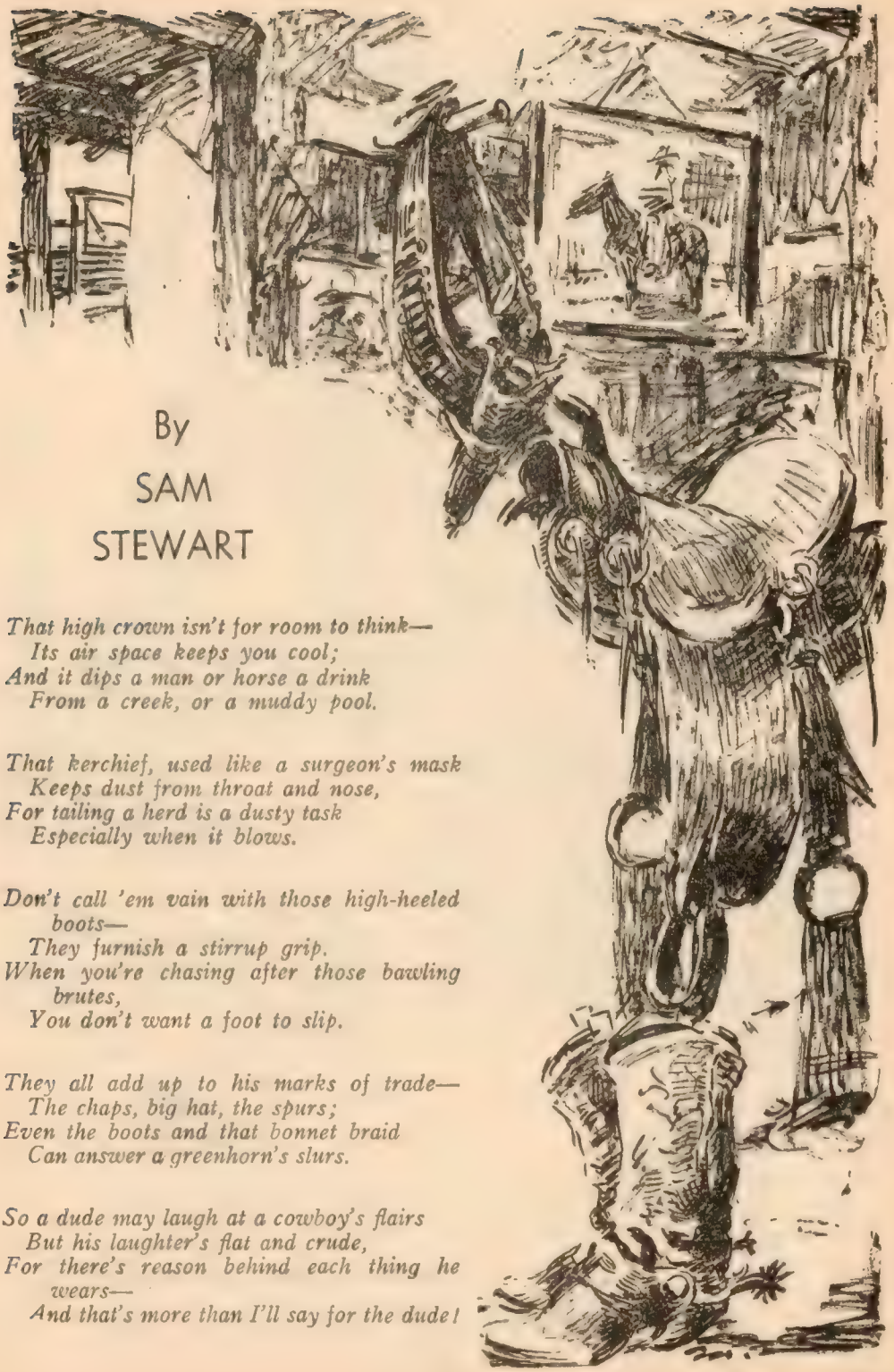
A dude may laugh at a cowboy's duds
And scoff that they're made for show,
But there's even reasons why cows have cuds
And an arrow must have a bow.

And there's reasons for boots, big hats and chaps
(Those britches which lack a seat)
And hearing 'em scoff is how, perhaps,
To tag 'em as tenderfeet.

Let a dude ride out through the scraggly oak
With a waddie, chasing strays,
And he'll learn that chaps aren't a dress-up joke—
As armor, they'll win his praise.

That outsize hat with the big wide brim
And the high, ten-gallon crown,
Is far from being a cowboy's whim
Or a showpiece, just for town.

The wide brim offers a heap o' shade
When the prairie sun beams warm;
But tie it down and your earmuff's made
To keep out the winter's storm.



By
SAM
STEWART

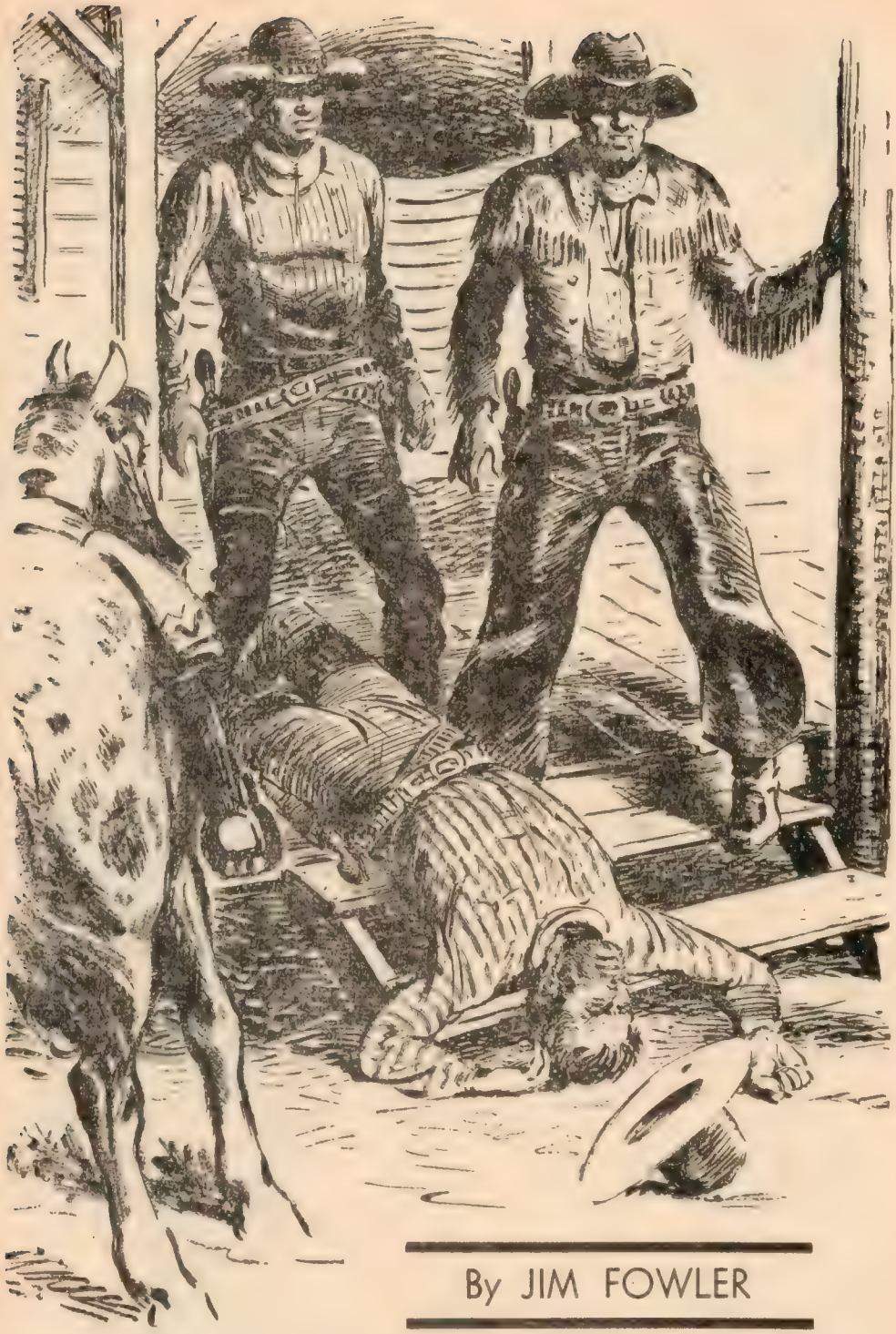
That high crown isn't for room to think—
Its air space keeps you cool;
And it dips a man or horse a drink
From a creek, or a muddy pool.

That kerchief, used like a surgeon's mask
Keeps dust from throat and nose,
For tailing a herd is a dusty task
Especially when it blows.

Don't call 'em vain with those high-heeled boots—
They furnish a stirrup grip.
When you're chasing after those bawling brutes,
You don't want a foot to slip.

They all add up to his marks of trade—
The chaps, big hat, the spurs;
Even the boots and that bonnet braid
Can answer a greenhorn's slurs.

So a dude may laugh at a cowboy's flairs
But his laughter's flat and crude,
For there's reason behind each thing he wears—
And that's more than I'll say for the dude!



By JIM FOWLER

Unforgettable Novelette of Western Gun-Justice

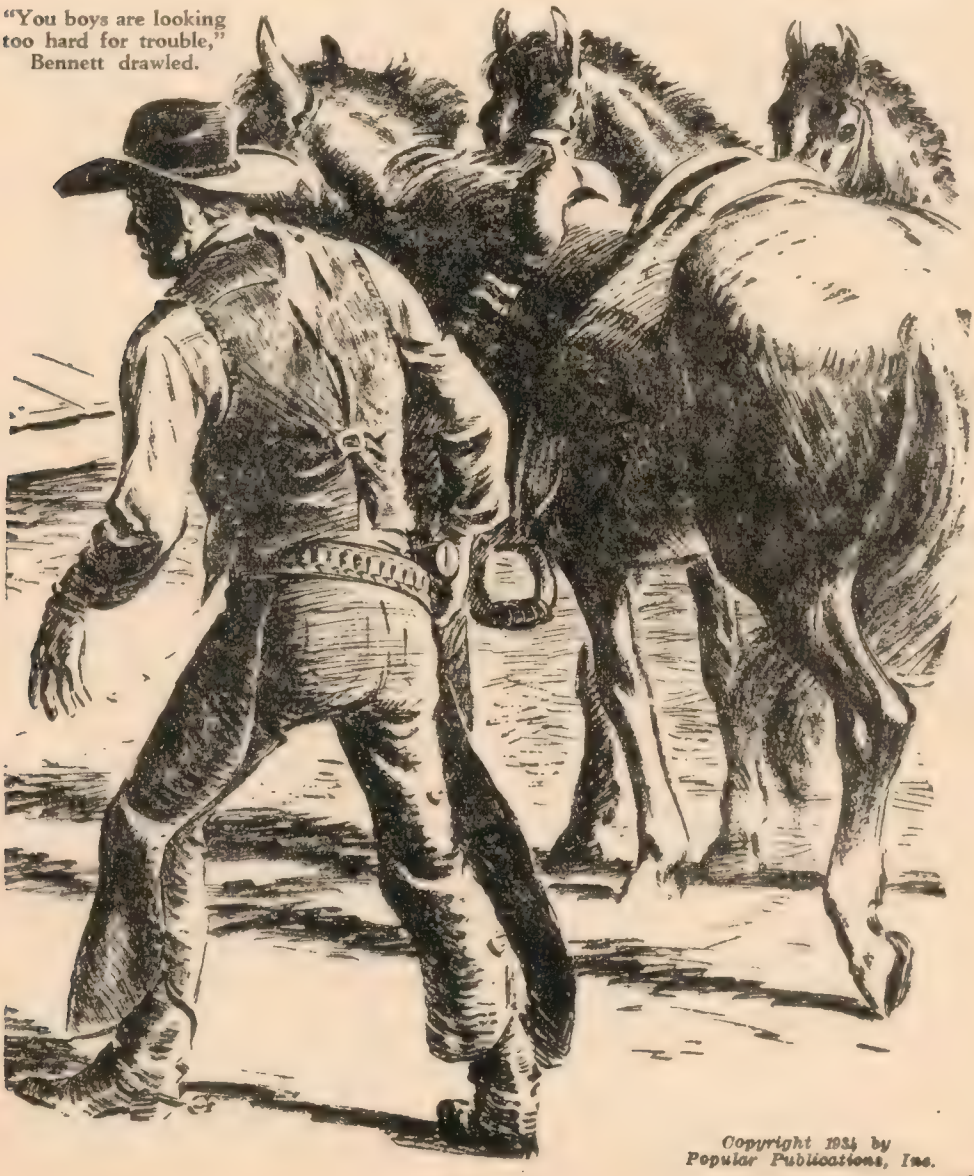
Outlawed Lawman

CHAPTER ONE

Trail of a Border Killer

Did Hugh Bennett, hunted owlhooter, have enough savage, raw mettle—and enough real bigness—to blot out the dark brand of infamy from the man who was, at once, his best friend—and deadliest enemy?

THE OLD-TIMER, hunkered down in front of the general store, whistled softly. "Never allowed to see *him* around here again!" he exclaimed.



"You boys are looking too hard for trouble," Bennett drawled.

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The storekeeper, seated on a cracked barrel on the store porch, followed his glance curiously. His eyes widened as they fell on a single figure coming up the street. Then he spat with judicial accuracy into the dust at the far edge of the plank walk.

"Well," he remarked, denying his surprise. "They never was nothin' the matter with his nerve."

"I hear he's turned plenty bad," the old timer remarked. "Killed a hombre down in Palmas on'y last week."

"Yeah," the other commented dryly. "You never can tell. I reckon he wasn't what you might call right *good* before. A lawman that'll be pi'sen-mean to *contrabandistas*, so as to skeer 'em into payin' bribes, ain't what you might call—"

"I wonder the gov'ment didn't throw him in the calaboose for that deal," the old timer interrupted.

"Couldn't rightly prove it, I reckon. They's lots of things you know are so without bein' able to convince a jury of it."

"Still, they had proof enough to bust him in disgrace."

"Yeah. Maybe they let him off kind of easy, account of his record."

"Maybe. Not that I'd call it so easy, at that. I wouldn't want to be in his boots. Without no chancet of his linin' up on the law-an'-order side an' mighty little chance of trailin' with the other bunch. They got it in for him, plenty! I'm bettin' he gets his before a week's out. In his place, I'd be walkin' in the middle of the road."

The man they spoke of walked on the sidewalk, however, and was without any apparent concern. A shrewd eye might have sensed a constant alertness in him—a tension which, mentally, was equivalent to walking in the middle of the street. He was tall and lean-hipped, with the straight back and wide shoulders of range-bred men, and he was dressed as punchers dress, though perhaps with a little more care.

The soft, handtooled, high-heeled boots were of beautiful leather and finely made, and the bat-winged chaps and high gray sombrero must have cost money. In contrast to them, was a well-worn cartridge belt with an equally worn holster tied low on the right thigh. From the holster protruded the walnut butt of a Colt .45, scarred and scratched but free from notches.

Yet somehow no one needed to be told that there were invisible notches in that sixgun, and that the bitter gray eyes of the man who packed it had more than once watched death hit home from its blazing muzzle.

"If old Jethro Harbin was alive—" the storekeeper began.

"You reckon he could have ventilated Jethro?" the old timer reflected. "It always did seem to me—" He broke off, whistling his low whistle again. "There comes Jethro's girl now. Wonder what he'll make of that?"

The girl who walked down the street was dressed in boots and a short, divided riding skirt which gave her a boyish appearance without detracting from her lithe feminine grace or wholly concealing the soft rounded curves of her body. She was an extraordinarily pretty girl.

At first sight of the man walking towards her she had hesitated, almost imperceptibly, then continued straight on her path. As she came up to him, the man swept off his gray sombrero and stopped to speak to her. But Lissa Harbin did not pause. She swept the figure before her with a frozen glance and then stepped past him with her eyes averted.

"Smack!" the old timer commented softly. "Neat an' pretty! I reckon Hugh Bennett won't forget that one soon!"

The storekeeper spat across the board walk. "Me," he observed, wiping his mouth. "I'd rather have been kicked by

a mule than been passed by that way."

The man in the gray Stetson—Hugh Bennett—stood looking after the girl's trim, rigidly-held figure, then went on his way again. If bitterness or anger boiled within him he gave no sign of it. The only visible change was that his mouth, if possible, had grown a little harder.

MORE than one curious eye had observed the incident between Lissa Harbin and Hugh Bennett and a murmur of excited comment ran along the street behind the latter's back. Everybody in the Hondo country knew the story.

Hugh Bennett had been a sergeant of the Border Patrol, under the captaincy of Jethro Harbin, and he and Lissa had been engaged to be married. Then one day Bennett had come back from patrol and reported that Captain Harbin had been killed in a brush with smugglers. He had Harbin's horse with him, but the body had never been found.

Cap'n Jethro, as he was known everywhere, had been killed on the edge of Deep Canyon, Bennett said, and his body had fallen the full two hundred feet into the boulder-broken rush of the stream below. Impossible to recover it, unless by chance it was washed into the quieter water below and floated, eventually, to the surface.

Knowing the warm friendship between the two men, nobody doubted Bennett's story until, shortly after, the latter was accused of taking a bribe from a gang of smugglers and dismissed in disgrace from the Border Patrol. That in itself, would have been enough to make Lissa Harbin break off their engagement, for she would never marry a man who had betrayed the service.

But other, uglier rumors had sprung up.

It was whispered that Jethro Harbin had known of Bennett's crookedness and had met his death through the knowledge. And to lend color to this rumor, Hugh Bennett appeared to have turned definitely bad. He had become a bitter, brooding, quarrelsome figure in the lowest Border dives and already, it was known, had killed a man in a barroom brawl. The fact that the victim himself was a known bad character detracted nothing from Hugh Bennett's reputation. It was a case, people said, of one killer getting another.

Now, for the first time since his disgrace, Hugh Bennett had encountered Lissa Harbin, with results which the whole countryside would roll on its tongue before twenty-four hours had passed.

Almost immediately afterward something else happened, which, to the knowing, was almost as dramatic. Stud Pardee, formerly Hugh Bennett's unsuccessful rival for Lissa, had been strolling down the street after Lissa Harbin. Pardee, black-coated, black-hatted and debonair, greeted Hugh Bennett amiably in passing, but with an overtone of irony in his voice. Bennett had returned the greeting, briefly, his face expressionless. But once past the man in the gray hat, Pardee called out after Lissa Harbin. The latter turned, smiled, and waited for Pardee to come up.

The street held its breath, for Hugh Bennett had halted, hearing that call, and now faced deliberately about to eye the other two. He saw the smile Lissa had for Pardee and watched the latter sweep off his black sombrero and bow gallantly over the girl's hand, obviously parading the fact that he and not Hugh Bennett was now the favored one. And that, with Bennett's recent reputation, could not be regarded as altogether healthy.

But Hugh Bennett merely narrowed his eyes, then turned away to continue up the street.

What happened next happened fast. Three men swaggered out of the saloon before which the former Border Patrol-

man happened to be standing. They had evidently been drinking and they came out talking and laughing boisterously, the first of them looking over his shoulder at the others.

Bennett turned at that moment and the pair collided. The reaction of the man who came out of the saloon was like that of a rattler which has been stepped on. His backward movement was as though a snake had coiled. His wide-set yellow eyes flared with fear—with the instinctive, dangerous fear of the killer who has stumbled on trouble. It was plain that he had not seen Bennett and believed that the latter had jostled him on purpose.

Silently, desperately, his hands flashed to the twin guns he wore tied low on his thighs.

Bennett's right hand moved with equal speed, but not toward his gun. His fist lashed up to land with explosive force on the other's unprotected chin. Something in the unleashed, sudden violence of that punch told of the suppressed anger which had been smoldering in the man. It lifted the gunman clear of the sidewalk and dropped him senseless on the boards.

Bennett wasted scarcely a glance on him. His gray eyes blazing with the unchained force of his wrath, he turned toward the other two, challenging. For an instant, there was silence, then one of them removed his hand slowly from the butt of the sixgun where the ex-Border man's glance had frozen it.

The blaze in Bennett's eyes subsided; but his mouth remained hard. "You boys are lookin' too hard for trouble," he drawled finally. "Tell Spike when he wakes up that if he gets nervous that way he'll get himself killed. I'm not lookin' for trouble, but I'm plenty able to provide it—so step easy."

Without waiting for a reply he moved off deliberately, his back looking at once unconcerned and uncompromising. The man who had had his hand on his gun grabbed it again, in a kind of automatic reaction, as soon as Bennett's back was turned. He was a short, dark man, with a cast in one eye, who looked as though he would have no scruples about shooting a man in the back. But he did not draw. There were plenty of eyes on him, and straight murder was frowned upon even in Hondo Center.

The old-timer let out his breath, puffing his cheeks. "I just about called it, didn't I?" he demanded. "He'll be travelin' to hell on a shutter before a week's out."

The storekeeper nodded. "That Spike hombre must have been makin' his brag about what he'd do to Bennett, now that he don't pack no badge. When they bumped into one another thataway, he thought Hugh had heard it an' was forcin' the play."

HUGH BENNETT did not look back. He went on down the street, taking his time. When he had gone about a hundred yards he turned into a passageway between two buildings. It brought him out into an area of irregularly placed adobes which marked the Mexican quarter of the town. He went along narrow streets until he came to a small, dirty-looking cantina, with two fly-covered tables before it and a small bar in the front room. He went in.

There was nobody at the bar except the proprietor, a pock-marked Mexican with a knife scar running from the corner of one eye to the lower edge of the jaw. The scar and the pockmarks made him look tough, but there was something solid about him, too. He did not greet Bennett, but merely watched him woodenly.

The ex-Border Patrolman ordered tequila and stood idly toying with the glass, frowning into it. After a moment he asked the barman, "How's the street?"

Wordlessly, the Mexican came around the bar and went to the door. "Nobody," he reported, after a casual look up and

down. "Nobody is in sight at all."

Bennett tossed off the tequila. "I'll go up," he said to the Mexican's back.

He went up a narrow flight of stairs and knocked once long and twice short on a closed door. "It's me, Curt," he said.

The door opened to reveal a blond, square-featured young man in range clothes. He did not speak until the door was closed again, then he said, "Hiya, Hugh."

Hugh Bennett grinned at him, the bitterness suddenly gone from eyes and mouth. "Rackin' along," he said. "I got your note. What's on your mind?"

The man called Curt looked serious. "I sent for you because it looks like things are gettin' warm. Word came from across the Border."

Bennett said lazily, "That makes it double. I've just heard from this side."

Curt Kramer looked expectant, but Bennett did not explain, though his hand wandered automatically to the pocket of his shirt, where rested Curt's scribbled note. "Know any details?" he asked after a moment.

"Not a one. Just had a whisper that it might be big."

Bennett nodded, without speaking.

"What you aimin' to do, Hugh?"

"Go up to Whiskey Jack's."

Curt frowned. "I wish you could think of somethin' better than that," he said. "That crowd up there'll just about tromp you on sight."

Hugh Bennett looked grim. "Mebbe-so, mebbe not," he answered. "There's a chance they'll think it's better to take me in than put me against them. Anyway, I figger that's my best play. So I'm makin' it."

"I wish I could go with you," Curt said gloomily. "One man. If that nest of sidewinders decides to get hostile—"

Hugh Bennett looked down at the Colt which hung heavy from its sagging belt and snuggled familiarly against his thigh. It was as though he sought involuntarily the reassurance of its presence. He knew he had played in hard luck when he had tangled with Spike Wolf.

Spike was a member of the gang that hung around Whiskey Jack's, and the man was plain poison. It would have been better to have caught his hands—better even to have risked refusing to draw. Spike would not make trouble, either openly or under cover. And going up to the Whiskey station was dangerous enough without having that added complication.

He shrugged and put out his hand. "I'll be ridin'," he said, flashing his sudden grin. "Don't go to sleep in church."

CHAPTER TWO

Whiskey-Station Law

LAWMEN, as a rule, avoided Whiskey Jack's place. It was a long way into the hills, and the hills themselves were not very healthy for the law. Hugh Bennett had stopped in there several times with old Jethro Harbin, but there had been a pair of them then—a hard pair to beat—and the prestige of the Border Patrol was behind them. This was different.

Now, however, neither his face nor his manner showed the slightest sign of constraint as he dismounted before the small ramshackle corral and turned the palomino stallion into it. He was aware as he did so that Whiskey Jack himself was watching him from the door of the adobe which housed the bar, and he could read an expression of astonishment on the whiskey peddler's face.

He made his way to the adobe, his eyes apparently unconcerned, taking in every detail of the place. The bunk shack near the corral appeared deserted, and from the number of horses in the corral itself he

judged that most of the gang of gunmen and smugglers who hung out here were absent.

Whiskey Jack nodded to him surlily, but he stood aside readily enough to let Hugh Bennett enter. Whiskey Jack was a big man, larded over with a thick layer of fat, pig-eyed, with a loose, evil mouth under a purple-veined nose.

Bennett saw that the small barroom was empty of customers. He went to a table in a corner, sat down and ordered whiskey. Mary, Whiskey Jack's squaw, came to the doorway behind the bar and looked at him impassively.

Through Jethro Harbin, Bennett knew her slightly, but she gave him no recognition. She was a Hopi woman, gone fat and sloppy. Harbin appeared to have known some of her family.

"Howdy, Mary," Bennett greeted her easily.

The woman merely grunted woodenly and turned back into the kitchen.

Whiskey Jack brought him his drink. "Aimin' to bunk here tonight?" he asked with an attempt at geniality.

"Thinkin' of it," Bennett answered, looking at him with a flat gaze which did not invite further questioning.

"I'll go down and grain your bronc," the whiskey peddler offered.

"I'll take care of him myself," Bennett said. "We'll let him cool off some first."

"Shore!" the whiskey peddler said hastily. "He's a mighty fine bronc—don't blame you for lookin' after him, personal."

He turned and looked out through to open doorway at the corral, and Bennett could see the gleam of cupidity in his eye. He was used to that. Horse-wise men had a covetous eye for that palomino.

"What you call him?" Jack asked.

"Meteor."

Whiskey Jack grunted. "Funny name for a horse. Where'd you get that?"

"Picked it up from a knowledge sharp that drifted down this way," Bennett told him with the beginning of a thin, sardonic smile on his lips. "It means a kind of a shootin' star—a fast one. Kind of goes with his color an' speed."

"What'll you take for him?"

"He ain't for sale," Bennett said. "I been offered up to a thousand for him, but I figure he's worth a lot more than that to me." He looked significantly at the big man. "I needed him some before—I'm likely to need him a lot more now."

The greed in the whiskey peddler's eyes was unmistakable now. Bennett grinned, "He's a one-man horse," he said, with meaning.

Whiskey Jack looked at him with veiled eyes, nodded in general agreement and went behind the bar.

Bennett grinned to himself. A lot of people would have liked to steal Meteor. A couple of them, disregarding his master's reputation, had tried it. They hadn't had much luck. Trying to steal Meteor was like getting mixed up with a couple of locoed catamounts.

Bennett's quick ear caught the ring of hoofs on the rocky trail leading up to the station. Evidently the whiskey peddler heard it too, for the expression of thoughtfulness on his face changed, hardened into determination. He went into the back room and Bennett could hear the low rumble of his voice, talking to the squaw. Outside, the twilight was deepening.

A NUMBER of men rode up to the corral. From this table Bennett could not see them but from the sounds there must have been half a dozen or more. Presently, four of them came in at the door. They were hard-faced, rust-covered, every man packing two guns and every man with the killer brand on him. At the sight of Hugh Bennett, their eyes widened and then their faces froze into blankness One of the four was Spike Wolf.

"Howdy, boys," Hugh Bennett drawled. His voice was non-committal

but cordial enough, his manner relaxed and easy.

Three of the men said, "Howdy," in clipped, careful tones, and went on toward the bar. Spike Wolf stopped, "Why, if it ain't the busted law-hound!" he sneered.

"In person," Hugh agreed easily. "Hiya, Spike?"

Wolf's yellow eyes flared, his lips drew back over teeth in a snarl. "I'm all here," he snapped, "even to my jaw. Lookin' for trouble?"

"Not any," Hugh said calmly. The nerves along his gun-arm began to thrill. It would be five to one if Spike opened the party, and it would be Boothill for Hugh Bennett. "I'm not avoidin' trouble either," he said, his eyes hardening. "In your place, I wouldn't claw for that iron. I'm not close enough this time to clip you on the jaw."

The gunman's eyes wavered, barely perceptibly. "Salty—ain't you?" he sneered.

The flat gaze of Hugh Bennett's gray eyes was like a blow. "Plenty," he answered. "I let you off of a killin' once because we bumped into each other by accident, an' you didn't know it. Better let the play ride as it lays."

"Oh, come to that, I ain't the one who's huntin' trouble," Spike backed down smoothly. "But don't git the idee *you* let me off of a killin'. My gun-hand is as fast as yours, Bennett, an' then some. Maybe, some day, I'll git reason for showin' you."

He turned to the bar and Bennett's pulse began to subside. That hurdle was over, anyway. He tossed off his drink and ordered another.

Whiskey Jack reached for a glass under the bar and filled it from the bottle, holding the glass clamped in his fat fist. He brought it to Bennett. The Indian woman appeared in the doorway. Bennett felt her eyes on him but kept his on Whiskey Jack, until the fat whiskey peddler had turned away. Then he looked at the squaw, just as Whiskey Jack snarled. "What are you doin' in here? Git out!"

Obediently, the squaw turned away, but Hugh had an odd feeling that her eyes were trying to convey some warning to him as she turned. He told himself that this couldn't be so—the woman had no reason to want to help him. But the incident increased his alertness. He was in danger here, and the squaw knew it. Well, he could take care of himself.

The men at the bar paid no further attention to him. They carried on a meaningless conversation with Whiskey Jack and between themselves. Hugh drank his drink in silence. When he had tossed off half of it, he was conscious that it had a peculiar bitter taste. The hair on the back of his neck stood up like a dog's hackles. Was that what the squaw had been trying to warn him of?

For an instant, fury nearly sent him at the whiskey peddler's throat—fury and fear. If he was doped here—but common sense cautioned him to wait and see. If he was mistaken, his accusation would make him ridiculous and would be taken as a sign of nervousness by the gang. He waited until he was sure nobody was looking and then tipped the rest of the drink onto the soiled floor, reaching swiftly down, where the sound of it would not be heard. Then he tilted the glass to his mouth and set it down ostentatiously.

He sat, feeling his own mental pulse—waiting for the first sign which would confirm his suspicion.

Two more came in whom Bennett recognized as members of the gang. They joined the others at the bar.

Then it came, the first sense of cloudiness, of heaviness of mind, and dullness of limb. There was no longer any doubt. He had been drugged.

He felt Whiskey Jack's eye on him, shrewd, appraising, then heard one of the newcomers ask in a low tone, "What's that jasper doin' here?"

The whiskey peddler's voice came in reply with a note of false surprise in it. "*I* dunno. I thought mebbe one of you fellers knew." His voice lifted. "Seein' you don't, I'm askin' that same question myself." He turned toward Bennett. "Hey, you—what's your business here?"

HUGH BENNETT'S body tautened up and his hands suddenly gripped the table before him as he turned his flat stare on the whiskey peddler. Rage boiled up in him, sudden, violent, deadly. So that was the game. This fat snake had doped him and was now about to force a fight, believing that Hugh would be too slowed up by the drug to flash his draw.

"Well, talk up!" Whiskey Jack roared. "We're mighty choosy about our company around here an' we don't want any badge-totin' skunks—past or present."

Bennett could see that the man's right hand was below the bar. When he went for his gun, Whiskey Jack's hand came flashing up, holding a sixgun. He remembered whispers of other men who had died at Whiskey Jack's hands—rawhided into fighting, no doubt, when they were too doped to take care of themselves.

Hugh Bennett got slowly to his feet. The muscles of his jaw stood out in ridges. Suddenly, his lean, hard, brown hand moved like the flick of a stirred hornet, too fast for the eye to see. The walnut-handled gun was in it and leveled before Whiskey Jack knew what was happening.

"You yellow-bellied snake!" Bennett's voice ripped across the room at him like a last of a mule-skinner's whip. "Drop that gun you're holdin'—drop it so I can hear it fall, or else jerk it up and try to use it. Quick, you fat scorpion! I'd rather down you than have a good meal!"

His eyes were avid, blazing with the sudden aroused lust to kill.

Congested veins on Whiskey Jack's nose stood out, black against a skin gone suddenly white. Something heavy dropped from his hand and clattered on the floor behind the bar.

"Dope my drink, will you?" Bennett lashed at him. "Is that how you've downed the others who died in here, you murderin' coyote? By God, you've caught the wrong wolf this time. Tell that squaw of yours to rustle coffee out here—plenty of it, plenty strong and pronto."

His eyes, strained, wraithful, turned on the men in front of the bar. "Don't get any bright ideas," he gritted at them. "I'm doped, but I can still take half of you to hell with me any time anything starts."

The six watched him, wary-eyed, while Whiskey Jack in a voice which shook a little, called his squaw and ordered coffee. Fury and fury alone was holding Bennett up against the smothering, inner fingers which pulled at his brain, and he could see that these men knew it. The killer gleam was in their eyes as they watched, wary, expectant.

But the coffee came quickly. There was some already made in the kitchen, and the squaw did not delay. She came in with a big pot, steaming.

Bennett snapped at the station-keeper, "Come out here." He stood Whiskey Jack with his back to the table, while he poured himself a cup of coffee. His gun seemed to cover every man in the room.

"If your woman has put any dope in this coffee," he said, "I'll know it before the effect gets too much for me, an' I'll stamp you out like I would a rattlesnake. If she's doped it, you better tell her to speak up now."

Whiskey Jack turned agonized eyes on the squaw. She shook her head. "No dope," She turned to go out into the kitchen. "I tol' you so," she flung at the station-keeper over her shoulder.

Hugh Bennett began to drink the coffee in great gulps. He put down cup after cup, while the four at the bar watched him, motionless, and Whiskey Jack stood sweating. After awhile, it was evident that

the coffee was taking effect. The recurrent glaze went out of the fighting gray eyes, the tension in the jaw muscles relaxed.

Then the door to the whiskey station opened and new danger stepped in.

CHAPTER THREE

Fill Your Hand, Lawdog!

THE MAN who paused just inside the door was Stud Pardee. He stood there a moment, black-coated, black-hatted, eyes narrowed, taking in the scene before him. His right hand was near the ivory handle of the sixgun which hung at his right thigh. His left hand moved casually to the lapel of his coat.

It was that hand which Hugh Bennett watched, pushing his alertness against the lessened but still smothering blanket of the drug. Stud Pardee was left-handed. The right gun on his thigh was for show and to attract attention. The danger lay in the shoulder gun which lay concealed opposite the hovering fingers of the left hand.

But Stud Pardee did not go for his guns. Instead, he dropped his hands and smiled.

"Whiskey," he said, "you look like you've gone an' got yourself into a unhealthy spot. What's it all about, Hugh? I can pour my own drinks, but I always did have a prejudice against it. Have you captured the bartender for the night?"

"Now," Bennett told him gravely. "Just until the effect of the drug he gave me wears off. I been savin' him for you, knowin' you like your red-eye passed out to you. If it hadn't been for that, he'd have been salivated by now. I never did like these big whiskey-swollen scorpions, anyway."

Stud Pardee said reproachfully, "Dope! Why, Whiskey!"

Hugh Bennett holstered his gun and with the back of his left hand smacked the station-keeper behind the ear. The blow was hard enough to send the big man reeling forward. "Git over there and deal 'em with both hands on the bar, polecat!" Hugh snapped.

Stud Pardee's eyes hardened as he saw the ex-lawman holster his gun. He came forward until he stood directly in front of Bennett. "Kind of off your trail up here, Bennett—aren't you?" he asked softly. "If you don't mind telling me, just what is your business here?"

"That depends some on you, Pardee."

Stud Pardee raised an eyebrow. "On me?" he asked.

"I'm aimin' to join up somewhere. Looks to me like I'd make a better man for you than for most."

"Man—for me? But I don't get you."

Hugh Bennett's eyes hardened. "Cards on the table, Pardee," he said harshly. "I ran with the law once. That's past. What I knew then, an' couldn't prove, I know now—an' don't want to prove. You may pull the wool over some folks' eyes by hangin' around Hondo Center, playin' the gent of leisure an' amatoor gambler, but it don't go down with me. I'm offerin' you a hand—a hand that knows what a gun's for an' won't stop for anythin' this side of hell. Take it or leave it."

Pardee's gaze was hard. "What you think you know and what you know are different, Bennett," he said. "But if I had a gang, you wouldn't be in it. A man that'll go crooked on the law when he's workin' for it, will go crooked on his partners. There isn't anybody around here that wants you or would have you. The quicker you hit the trail, the better it'll be for you."

Hugh Bennett's face stained an angry brick-red, but he controlled himself. "I didn't go crooked, Pardee," he said steadily. "A man can be framed, you know. Maybe it was the government that went back on me, when I was in a jam, instead of me goin' back on the government. But

now that it's done, what would you do in my place?"

"What the hell do I care what you do?" Pardee sneered. "You laid your trail when you ran with the law. I'm tellin' you to git—for your own good. There's more than one man around here who's honin' to slap lead through you. Not that I know why I bother with a renegade skunk like you."

Bennett's eyes narrowed and the color left his face but whether from fear or rage not even he could have told accurately. Nobody had to tell him that he was in the jam of his life. There were six men in that room who would be glad of a chance to shoot him. Only his reputation with a Colt kept them from forcing things right now.

They knew that one or more of them would die before the smoke cleared. And no man wanted to be first. Then he'd go down with enough lead in him to do for six men. There was one of two things he could do—and each was like signing his own death warrant.

He had to swallow Pardee's insults and get out. Or he could go for his gun right there. Even if he decided to get out, it wasn't probable that he would make it. Once the wolf showed weakness, this pack would go for him, snarling, hungry for the kill. He would never reach the door—death was here, with a cold finger already laid on his throat.

Pardee stood there, feet apart, hands hovering over his holster, a smooth grin on his thin mouth. His words still echoed the silence.

THE FOUR men at the bar shifted their positions a little, steadying on their feet. The creak of a pair of boots sounded loud. Out of the corner of his eye, Bennett could see their hands hanging near their guns; he could feel their eyes boring into him.

"Pardee," Bennett said after a moment. "I'd kill you for that now, if it suited my book to get cut down by your hired wolves. You're the same as dead now—but it can wait."

Pardee laughed harshly. "Yellow, huh?" he jeered.

"No, just smart."

"That's the way with you damn lawhounds. The minute you haven't got a badge and the government to back you up, you turn out to have a yellow streak up your back a foot wide. You was plenty salty when you thought you was sittin' on top of things. There wasn't any friendliness between us then. Now that you're down, an' I've taken your girl, you come whinin' around."

Bennett's eyes blazed. "You've taken her, you slimy toad! By God, she may not be for me, but she's got more sense then to look at a cheap tinhorn like you!"

Pardee's face set. "I'll have her," he gritted. "but you won't be alive to see it. Go for your gun, damn you! Fill your hand!"

As he spoke his left hand moved like a striking snake, came out from under his coat grasping a heavy, short-barrelled gun. It was a fast draw—flashing fast and smooth. Yet Hugh Bennett bettered it. His Colt was jammed against Pardee's stomach by the time the gambler's gun was levelled at him.

"Hold it!" he snapped, in a voice like the crack of a whip. "Keep your thumb on that hammer, Pardee!"

Almost, the warning was unnecessary. The gambler had seen that he had lost the draw. His stomach had already turned over with the expectation of the slug that would smash through it. Just in time, his loosening thumb tightened on the hammer of his weapon, held it.

"Drop that gun, you!" Bennett hammered out to Spike Wolf who had completed his draw. "Drop it, before I gut-shoot your tinhorn boss."

The man hesitated, looked helplessly at

Pardee's rigid back. He couldn't move.

"Don't think I won't get him," Bennett snarled. "This gun can't miss, whether I'm hit or not. Put up your gun, Pardee—stick it into leather, or by God, I'll let you have it."

The gambler looked from his own gun, leveled at Bennett's chest, and back again to the ex-lawman's blazing eyes. What he saw there convinced him that there wasn't an ounce of bluff in Bennett. Unless Pardee obeyed, he knew that the Colt against his stomach would explode. And every instant of waiting was fraught with death—if anybody in that room burnt a cap.

Slowly, carefully, he returned his gun to its holster. "No sense in our killin' one another, Bennett," he said coolly. "Drop your gun, Spike."

Spike said slowly: "I don't drop my iron for anybody. I'm puttin' it back in leather—an' that'll have to do." He holstered the weapon deliberately.

Sweat beaded Hugh Bennett's face. A sweat which no one but Hugh understood. That draw of his had been slow. He had been nearly too late. Every moment of the time he had been fighting the drug which clawed at his senses. The coffee had helped him for a time but the drug was stronger. It was beginning to get the upper hand again.

He had to get out—into the air, into some place of safety, quick.

DESPERATELY, he fought to control himself, to keep the snap in his tone and the danger bright in his eyes. Even if he could get to his horse and saddle him, he doubted if he could stay in the saddle long.

"You crawlin' snakes," he raged suddenly. "You thought you were goin' to get me, didn't you? Well, I'm goin' to give you plenty chances to get me. I'm stayin' here! Anybody that wants to swallow lead can come at me whenever he's got a mind to. Maybe some day, you'll find out that you got a leader made out of straw—then you'll be willin' to foller a *man!*"

He swung savagely on Whiskey Jack. "Show me a room, you thievin' grease tub. I'm on your permanent guest list. Hear it? Get movin'!"

"We—we ain't got no rooms," the station-keeper stammered, though his eyes snarled hatred. "You want a bunk in the bunk house, you can have it."

Bennett had moved behind the bar as he spoke, stepping sideways and keeping the others in view. Now he kicked Whiskey Jack suddenly in the rear. "You got no room, huh?" he rasped. "Then git out of your own room—I'll sleep there. *Move!*"

The station-keeper moved. He led Bennett sullenly to a vacant room at the rear of the house. It contained a single bed, a chair and a washbasin. Whiskey Jack fumbled with a lamp and Bennett had the idea that he was watching him covertly. He remembered that he had staggered as he walked behind the station-keeper. Whiskey Jack must have heard it.

Now that the excitement and danger of the scene in the bar was over, he was beginning to feel uncontrollably sleepy. The gun in his hand felt like lead. He wasn't sure he could shoot in time if the station-keeper jumped him now. Wearily he forced a snarl into his voice.

"I don't need a light. Get out. Get out before I smack lead through you."

Whiskey Jack hesitated a barely perceptible instant, then went towards the door.

When he was gone, Hugh staggered to the door and closed it. Desperately, he fumbled for a key or some sort of bolt. He knew he had to sleep and sleep soon, but it would be suicide to sleep in this whiskey station except behind a locked door. Even with the door locked, he was afraid that his unconsciousness would be so complete and heavy that the sound of a forced lock or a forced window might not awaken him

There was no key and no way to bolt the door.

When the realization of that came to him, he staggered hopelessly to the chair and sat down. He was a dead man, he realized dimly. And death was all the more certain because he no longer really cared. All he wanted was to sleep. Nothing was too dangerous to keep him from that. His limbs were leaden, numb. His brain had a dark weight on it. Slowly, his head sank.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meteor

IT WAS the thought of Lissa Harbin which jerked him out of the sleep threatening to overcome him. Something Stud Pardee had said had gotten into his mind with a sense of danger—danger to Lissa.

"I'll have her," the gambler had said, and Pardee was not a man to make empty boasts. If anything happened to Hugh, now that Jethro wasn't there—

Slowly, with an agonized effort of will, he got himself off the chair, staggered across the room to where a metal pitcher of water stood on the washstand. He poured the water over his head. It wasn't very cold, but it helped. With leaden arms he began slapping his face—hard, as hard as he could. Then he went to the window and slid out. He tried to get out softly, but when he hit the ground he fell with a heavy thud and was a long time getting to his feet.

When he got up, he headed toward the corral. He had to get away. He had been a fool to think of staying, now that his hope of getting in with the gang was over. Somehow, he would have to watch from outside. That was going to be difficult. Even if the gang started out from here at night, it would be difficult, almost impossible, to trail them in the dark without being heard.

He went to the corral gate and leaned against it. Softly, so softly that it could not have been heard twenty feet away, he whistled. In a moment, the stallion was snuffing at the bars beside him. He opened the gate and then staggered over for his saddle and gear. The saddle was so heavy he could barely lift it.

Panting, the sweat bursting out all over him, he carried it to the horse and managed to get it on his back. He got the bridle on and was fumbling with the cinch, when Meteor flung up his head, sniffing. There had been no sound of any sort, but Hugh Bennett slipped behind the stallion and got out his sixgun.

A dim form materialized out of the darkness. Slowly, desperately, Hugh lifted the gun and rested it on the saddle, leveling it at that blot in the night.

The form came closer, then spoke. It was the Hopi woman, Mary. "Mi'ser Bennett?" she asked softly.

Hugh hesitated, remembered the way she had looked at him, and said, "Yes."

The woman came up close. "You mus' go quick," she breathed. "They kill you. They go your room now—they look here nex'. I hear them talk. I go your room, you not there. You hurry now."

Hugh leaned his head against the saddle. "Whole gang?" he asked, uselessly.

"Yes," Mary told him. "Stud, he no want, but Spike ask how he know you not still Border Patrol. I think they goin' fight, but other men say like Spike an' Stud say, all right. You go quick now."

The Indian woman, evidently realizing his condition, gave a movement of alarm. She felt the saddle, caught at the cinch and drew it tight. Then she came to Hugh and put an arm around him. "You mus' go," she whispered, urgently. "Can you ride?"

"Sure; ride," Hugh mumbled, stirring himself. "Must fight—off— Come back an'—an' see what they—do.

"Listen," Mary breathed. "They do

nothing tonight. They ride tomorrow night—I hear them talk. You know Split Rock Hole? You go there—tomorrow I come. You go now quick."

The door to the bar opened, sending out a long strip of light. Somebody called from the darkness at the rear of the building, "Spread out and look for him. He must be out there in the brush."

Stud Pardee was silhouetted for a moment against the open doorway before he stepped out, sideways, into the shadow. "Better look at the corral first," he warned dryly.

Mary tugged at Hugh, got him into the saddle, where he sat, swaying perilously. "Remember—Split Rock Hole," she whispered. "Now go."

Hugh Bennett straightened in the saddle. "I'll remember," he said softly. He turned Meteor and started out at an easy walk. The squaw faded back into the shadow behind the bunkhouse.

A voice yelled, "It's him! He's ridin' off!"

A Colt barked, lancing the night with flame. But Hugh Bennett had already jumped Meteor into a gallop. He rode low in the saddle, clinging desperately to the horn and gave the horse his head. Gunfire rattled in his wake, but the searching lead went wide.

The crack of bullets in his ears, the wind in his face, and the racing pace of the stallion all helped him to fight the stupor which threatened to overwhelm him. When they had gotten a safe distance from the whiskey station, he pulled Meteor down to a trot and angled off into the hills, taking a circuitous course for Split Rock Hole.

He knew that there would be no pursuit that night and he had an idea that he could sleep in safety. By morning the effects of the drug would have worn off.

The Hole was really no more than a widening of a deep canyon, but there was grass there and water and it was pretty well hidden from view. He came on it at last, found the strength to unsaddle the stallion, and then dropped to the ground. Within three seconds he was dead to the world.

WHEN he awoke, it was with a sixth sense which warned him of danger. He came awake, reaching for his sixgun, his ears straining. There was no sound, no indication that he was not entirely alone. The small grassy valley lay hot under a sun which was almost overhead.

For a moment, he had no idea where he was, no recollection of the events of the night preceding. His head ached and his mouth felt fuzzy.

He got to his feet and scanned the two entrances to the canyon, and next turned his eyes to the rim of rock which enclosed the valley. No sign of anyone. But Meteor, who had sought a fragment of shade on the other side of the hole had his head up, sniffing.

Gun in hand, Hugh started for the canyon entrance toward which the stallion faced. Almost immediately the Hopi woman, Mary, came into view. Recollection swept on Hugh. He stared aghast at the sun, realizing that it was noon and that he had slept for almost sixteen hours.

He greeted the squaw eagerly. "Has anything happened?" Guilt was on him with the knowledge that anything might have happened while he slept.

The woman shook her head. "No, it will happen tonight," she told him. "I hear. They go each alone, to meet where White Horse Canyon crosses the Border. When the sun is going down, they will be there. After that I do not know, but I think they go to the house of a goat-herder an' come back the same way."

"Do you know what they're bringing over?"

"That which the yellow man smokes." the squaw told him.

"Any idea how much?"

"Much—very much. If not, how could Stud go away and buy his ranch?"

Hugh Bennett's eyes narrowed and his heart began to pound with excitement. "You mean that Stud Pardee is about to quit—pull out?"

"I think so. Spike, he say this, an' Stud he is ver' angry but he say 'Yes.' I think the other don' like that much. Maybe there will be trouble. I dunno."

Hugh's mind raced. If this was to be Stud Pardee's last haul, he was just in time. Whatever he did must be done tonight—or never. He had to be in White Horse Canyon when the gang met. He had to follow them, somehow, to the goatherder's shack and then back to the Border where they would have to be jumped before they had a chance to separate. There was a possibility that they would come back in a body to Whiskey Jack's, but he couldn't take that chance.

Moreover, if there was to be trouble over Pardee's pulling out, he wanted to get at the gang before that trouble started. He had to get Pardee alive. Some way force him to talk.

The trouble was in the time element. Where White Horse Canyon crossed the International Border was three hours' fairly fast ride. It was already well after noon. He had to get to the place of rendezvous well ahead of the earliest of the gang if he was to conceal himself effectually. That meant riding now. There was no time to get help—no way to get a message to anyone. He would have to tackle seven men. Tackle them single-handed!

He cursed himself for being fool enough to be doped. Cursed himself doubly for having planned so badly. "Look here," he said to the Hopi woman, "Can you get away? I mean long enough to take a message to town?"

Mary shook her head stolidly. "I mus' go back now," she said. "I could not come this morning because Jack is there. He be back soon. He kill me if I go off."

Hugh looked at her curiously. "How come you're helpin' me this way?"

"You don' know?"

Hugh shook his head, a glint of suspicion in his eyes.

"Maybe you know one old desert rat, Huh?" the woman asked slyly. "He live in these hills by name of Tonopah Jake. He frien' to me."

HUGH stared at her in astonishment and with the beginning of hope. So that was the explanation—Tonopah Jake! It was the man he most wanted to get in touch with—the man he would have gotten in touch with the night before if things had not gone so wrong.

"You see him?" he asked the squaw eagerly. "Where is he? Is he near here?"

"Ever' day he come get a letter in a tree near station. He come now soon, for news from you. But I dunno where he is. He don' stay same place twice."

"Listen, you take him a letter today, see? Tell him to be down where White Horse Canyon crosses the Border *before* sunset. I'll be there to meet him."

"I try," the woman told him stolidly. "I can go most days because Jack he sleep after he eat. But today maybe not. I dunno. I think him an' Stud come back with girl. Maybe Jack don' sleep."

"Girl? What girl?"

Mary's face became if anything more expressionless than before. "I dunno," she said. "I think Stud will go away with this girl. He tell me he will have girl for me to take care of today."

Hugh tried to tell himself that it was impossible that Lissa Harbin be the girl. It would be merely some dance hall girl whom Stud had picked up to accompany him. Lissa would never come, and Stud would never have the nerve to try to take her by force. But even as he argued with himself, something warned him that the girl was Lissa.

He stood for a moment in an agony

of indecision and helpless anger. He could not go to Lissa's help and carry out his plans for White Horse Canyon too. He could have little hope of attacking the gang at Whiskey Jack's successfully, and even if he did, that would in itself spoil everything.

Mary said, "I take care of girl."

Hugh looked at her in sudden desperate hope. "You think you can?"

"I take care of her," Mary answered grimly.

There was something in that simple statement which carried conviction. Hugh had an idea that, somehow, through cleverness and courage, Mary would do just that, though it cost her her life. He was on the point of asking her again why she should be willing to risk so much, when the squaw said, "I go now. I 'fraid Jack come home."

Hugh's jaw tightened. He would have to risk it—he'd have to leave this 'girl' to Mary while he rode for the Border. But God help Stud Pardee if any harm came to Lissa Harbin!

"Try to get that letter to—Tonopah," he told Mary.

The Indian woman nodded. "I find a way," she said, with apparently sudden decision. A moment later she had disappeared into the canyon on her way back to the whiskey station.

Hugh threw his saddle on Meteor and tightened his belt. He had nothing to eat since the noon before and he wanted a cup of coffee badly, but he did not dare build a fire in Split Rock Hole.

Meteor pricked up his ears and threw up his head, snuffing. A glint of metal showed on the lowest rim of the Hole. Hugh's hand flashed to his Colt, flipped up, filling the canyon with a sudden blast which sounded thunderous in the hot midday quiet. A split second afterwards, the keening crack of a Winchester mingled with the blast of the Colt, so close that the two shots sounded like one double one. The bullet snapped by Hugh's ear. No doubt that if he had not fired first, it would have found its objective.

He jumped backward, thumbing the Colt, searching for a glimpse of the man who had fired. For a second there was silence, then he heard the scrambling footsteps of a man running on the rocks above. Hugh ran toward the other side of the Hole, attempting to get a better view of the rim from which the sounds came, but he could not get within sight of the dry-gulcher. A moment later he heard a faint clatter of hoofs and realized that the man had escaped.

Hugh would have to ride to the end of the canyon before he could start in pursuit. Instead, he rode out in the other direction, headed for the Border, before the man who had shot at him brought the gang around his ears.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Golden Stallion

SPIKE WOLF had been suspicious of Whiskey Jack's squaw since the night before. He remembered that when the gang had gone into Hugh's room to kill him, Mary had not been in the kitchen. And when they returned to the bar after the shooting at the corral, he had seen her slip in unobtrusively through the back door. It might mean nothing, of course—and he had said nothing about it.

The next day, however, he had kept a surreptitious eye on the Hopi woman. When Stud Pardee and Whiskey Jack started off on their errand to town, he himself had disappeared to a spot where he could watch the whiskey station without being seen.

He had seen Mary make what appeared to be an attempt to ride away, but none of the others in the gang had seen her and Mary had apparently given up the attempt.

Spike's hot, yellow eyes narrowed. This was going to be worth watching. Several times the same thing occurred and then, finally, Mary had slipped away—as she thought, unseen.

At a distance, Spike followed her. When he saw her enter Split Rock Canyon, he guessed where she was headed for, and he got there before her. He could have killed Hugh as he slept, but curiosity held him back. Lying on a shelf of rock above them, he could hear every word that passed between them.

He was tempted to kill both at once, but the position in which they stood was not favorable to it and he wanted to make no mistake. He waited until the Hopi woman had gone and until Hugh's change of position in saddling the stallion gave him a fair shot.

Hugh's fast shot had thrown rock in Wolf's face and spoiled his aim. For a second he hesitated, then caution told him to get out of sight. He was lying on flat rock without cover—not a very good position from which to swap lead with a man who threw it with Hugh Bennett's deadliness.

Moreover, he had the edge on Bennett, for he knew the latter's plans, and could get him any time. The thing to do now was to stop the mouth of the Hopi woman before she delivered her message or had time to do any more harm. He slid back out of sight and ran for his horse.

A wide, fast circle led him to the mouth of the canyon just at the time Mary emerged from it. Grinning, he rode up to her.

"Takin' a little pasear, Mary?" he asked jovially. "Who's the lucky hombre?"

His eyes glittered at the sight of the sudden fear on the Hopi woman's face. An ingratiating smile succeeded the fear, he saw, and grinned to himself at the sight.

"I too ol' an' fat," Mary told him.

"You're not too old and fat to turn traitor on us, are you?" Spike demanded, his eyes glinting.

Fear came back to Mary's face. She did not answer, but tried to go on her way. Spike slipped down from his mount into her path and drew his right gun. Mary shrank back, then she dodged and started running clumsily away from him.

Spike snarled and ripped out, "Well, take it in the back then!"

The Colt spoke. The Indian woman cried out once and a sort of grunting groan that had a feel of surprise in it—and stopped dead in her tracks. She swayed a moment, then fell forward on her face. Hopi Mary would carry no message then or ever to the man called Tonopah Jake. She had paid her debt of friendship in full.

Spike Wolf walked forward and turned the lifeless form over with his foot. His bullet, he saw, had gone where he had aimed it—under the left shoulder blade. Satisfied that the woman was dead, he remounted and set out on the rest of his task.

He took a short cut over the hills, riding hard, knowing that he would reach the canyon before Bennett, even on the stallion, could get there. That would be better than following the ex-lawman—surer and less dangerous.

His own gelding, in addition to being fast, was an excellent mountain horse and the smuggler pushed him hard.

White Horse Canyon, where it crossed the International Border was a deep cut in wild, tumbled, deserted country. No more ideal spot for smuggling could be imagined. At a spot some half mile from the Mexican Line, the two trails, one of which Hugh Bennett would be expected to take, converged. One led through the bottom of the canyon, the other ran along the rim.

Spike Wolf cached his horse in an arroyo some distance away and took up his position in a clump of brush which commanded both trails. If Bennett came by the lower trail, the shot would not be so sure, but Spike felt certain that he would

not miss. He had never missed before.

And then he heard the clink of Meteor's shod hoofs on the upper trail.

THE SMUGGLER'S yellow eyes narrowed and his pulse began to pound. He sighted the rifle tentatively on where the rider's chest would appear as he came around the bend. Spike Wolf waited.

Then, to his surprise, the sound of the hoofs ceased. Evidently Bennett, if it was Bennett, had stopped beyond the jut of the rock which would bring him into view. A moment passed. During that moment a tremor which he could not control appeared along the barrel of the Winchester. He had failed once to get this man. It suddenly occurred to him that if he failed again, he would have no avenue of retreat. He would have to shoot it out from the clump of brush in which he lay.

Hugh Bennett's head appeared around the jut of rock. It came slowly, keen eyes scanning the landscape. Spike held his breath and did not move. Bennett was on foot. An attempt to shoot now would mean moving the rifle barrel through a considerable arc, and would also necessitate a change in Spike's position. He dared not risk it.

Bennett's eyes took in the clump of brush, left it, returned to it, curiously. Spike Wolf cursed to himself. It was almost as though the man before him had second sight—was forewarned of danger before any of his senses apprised him of it.

But the gunman had chosen his position well. The brush was thick, and the late sun was behind it. The rifle barrel did not protrude. It was no more than a tiny, dark circle within the tangle of the brush. No human eye could have picked it out.

Bennett's eyes returned to the farther landscape. Then, evidently satisfied, his head disappeared and a moment later the scrape of hoofs advised the listener that Bennett had mounted again.

His pulses jumping and that queer tremor in the gun again, Spike Wolf sighted on the spot he had fixed on before. Hugh on Meteor rode around the jut of rock. And this time the stallion did not fling up an inquiring head. Spike was down-wind from the pair.

The gunman, moving his rifle infinitesimally to line the sights on Bennett's chest, cursed the nervousness which was on him. The sights weaved through an arc he was not able to control as his finger squeezed the trigger. Then, abruptly, the ripping crack of the Winchester blasted the silence, echoed deep from the opposite canyon wall, went crying off in a series of whining echoes between the hills. Hugh Bennett swayed a little in the saddle, then tumbled off, on the cliff side, and disappeared below the canyon rim.

Spike Wolf heard his body strike once and then quiet came. Spike lay motionless a long moment, his hands shaking with the reaction. Presently he got up, drawing a long breath. It had been a head shot, he thought, but that did not matter. It was a hundred foot fall to the rocky floor of the canyon. No man, wounded or not, could survive it.

As he emerged from the brush, Meteor, who had been snuffing nervously at the canyon rim over which his master had disappeared, raised his head and pawed the ground, eyes rolling and nostrils flaring red. He made a picture there, with the late sun on his golden coat, and long silver mane which set Spike Wolf's pulses leaping again. For the first time, he began fully to realize his luck. He had not only gotten rid of the biggest potential menace which the gang had, but he had also acquired the horse of a lifetime.

He spoke soothingly to the stallion and began to walk towards him, but something in the palomino's pawing hoofs and rolling eyes whispered wisdom to him in time. The big golden horse had murder in him then—he was a killer, if Spike had

ever seen one—and Spike had a certain instinctive recognition of killers.

He backed off, eyeing the stallion warily, and then turned and ran for his own horse. He had better be mounted and have a rope in his hand before he tackled that one. A moment later he was back, lariat looped, ready for the throw. Somewhat to his surprise, the stallion did not take alarm at the sight of the rope. He was still where Spike had left him, nostrils flaring again and hoofs pawing the hard rock-floored trail.

SPIKE grinned. What a horse! He built his loop and let it sail for the tossing, golden head. The loop settled, tightened. And then Spike Wolf got the surprise of an eventful life. Meteor did not draw back against the rope. Instead, he charged, squealing.

The thing caught the gunman off-guard. For the split second he stared in fascinated horror at the driving golden fury which came at him, ears laid back and big eyes insane. Then the wild, squealing head came up, rearing, teeth bared and powerful hoofs driving straight for the gunman's body. The gelding he rode saved him then. He jumped sidewise with a motion which nearly unseated his rider, and broke into a run. Even so, one of those hurtling hoofs grazed the killer's thigh—left it numb.

The gelding brought up suddenly and the stallion charged again. Spike realized that the dally around the saddle horn had brought his mount to a halt. Hastily, as the gelding dodged, taking a vicious nip in the flank as he did so, Spike unloosed the rope and set spurs to his mount.

The stallion followed like a flash, savage teeth driving for the gelding's rump. Spike clawed for his sixgun. No question of which was the faster between those two animals. That yellow, squealing demon could run circles around the gelding. Nothing to do but shoot him.

For a split second, Spike hesitated, then drew a sigh or relief. The stallion had slackened, had stopped, head up in a brazen whinny of triumph and defiance. Spike did not try to pull his racing horse down. He let him go until he had put a safe distance between himself and the palomino fury. He had one last glimpse of the stallion as his own mount dipped down over the nearby rise.

Bennett's horse was standing still, the rope dangling from his superb, upflung head, the sun making a shimmer of living gold around his magnificent body. He looked fabulous, unbelievable—a horse from another world, more fit for gods than for men.

Spike Wolf swore. He had lost his lariat but he would get another. And when he did, he'd lay that stallion by the heels if it was the last thing he did on earth!

CHAPTER SIX

Outcast Heritage

LISSA HARBIN passed the afternoon in constantly increasing disquiet. She had not counted on being alone at Whiskey Jack's for so long a time, or even at all.

She had come there with Stud Pardee because the gambler had promised her evidence against the man who had killed her father and had convinced her that there was no other way to get it. He couldn't have contrived any stronger lure for Lissa. She would have gone anywhere, risked anything, to get that evidence. Stud had refused to tell her who the man was. He had merely promised to bring her two witnesses who would tell her the whole story.

But Lissa didn't believe she was running any risk. Stud Pardee in town showed none of the earmarks of the outlaw leader and killer he actually was. Debonair, gentlemanly, smooth, he made a good impres-

sion. Few—those and only people whose perceptions were extraordinarily sharp—doubted his honesty, and nobody doubted his courage. He made a considerable figure of a man. And with Lissa he had been careful to put his best foot forward. Even when, after Hugh Bennett's disgrace, Lissa had definitely rejected his suit, he had taken it well. Without giving up, he had made his intentions appear those of a friend, rather than those of a suitor. And Lissa, bereft at once of her father and her fiance, had badly needed such a friend. She was grateful to Stud Pardee.

On the ride out, Stud had warned her that she would have to wait at the station until he got back with the two witnesses, but had assured her that she would be perfectly safe in the care of Whiskey Jack and Mary. The squaw, however, had not appeared and the way the whiskey peddler had of looking at her was scarcely reassuring.

Half a dozen times, as the afternoon had worn into evening, she had been on the point of saddling her pony and riding for home, but each time Whiskey Jack, greasy-eyed, together with her own eagerness to hear the truth about her father, had dissuaded her. Yet each time, she had the impression that in the whiskey peddler's persuasions there was the hint of a threat, the underlying possibility that she might be held by force if she insisted on going.

That was absurd, she told herself, he would have too much fear of Stud to— Yet the whiskey peddler never let her out of his sight. He had the air of a guard. And with that reflection came the first shattering doubt of Stud Pardee.

She got decisively to her feet. "I'm riding now," she said coolly. "Tell Stud I wouldn't wait any longer."

Whiskey Jack tried again to dissuade her, but she turned determinedly to the door. The big man's movement was surprisingly swift for anyone who carried as much weight as he did. He had a hand on her shoulder before she had gone a step. Outraged, she turned and slapped him hard.

The instant she had done so she saw that she had made a mistake. The blow had aroused the beast in the man. His piggish eyes gleamed angry lust at her, his great, powerful, fleshy arms went around her and drew her savagely toward him.

"You little cat!" he ground out. "You got claws, ain't you?"

FEAR took possession of Lissa. She struggled frantically in the grip which slowly tightened about her. Whiskey Jack's face was flushed, his eyes glazing. Suddenly she ceased to struggle, made herself go limp.

"Wait until Stud Pardee hears about this," she said coldly. "He'll kill you like the fat varmint you are!"

The effect was magical. The whiskey peddler's face lost color and his grip relaxed. "Now—now," he stammered. "I ain't done nothin' to you.

The girl seized her opportunity, whipped cat-like out of his grip and darted for the door. But again the big man was too fast for her. His big hand gripped her shoulder, tearing the stuff of her blouse. His other hand caught her throat and jerked her back. An instant later, he had her backed into a corner.

"You ain't goin' nowhere," he told her grimly. "I reckon Stud'd kill me for that quickerin' for anything else."

Comprehension dawned in Lissa's mind. She was a prisoner—and by Stud Pardee's orders. She tried to tell herself that the thing was unthinkable, but she knew that in her heart she had been fearing it all the time. Unbelievable or not, it was so.

During the hour which followed, her mind seethed with schemes for getting away, but the whiskey peddler watched her like a cat watches a mouse and re-

fused to be gulled by any of her tricks or persuasions.

Then the muffled thud of hoofs, the creak of harness at the corral told her that Pardee and the others had arrived.

She flared at the gambler as he came in the door. "What do you mean by having this beast keep me here by force?" she demanded furiously.

Stud replied placatingly, but the secret grins of the others told her that her worst fears had been justified. In a panic of fear and anger, she prodded the gambler into open speech.

"You and me are going to Mexico tonight," he told her curtly. "You belong to me now—you might as well know it."

"You fool!" she told him, trying to smother the terror which was on her. "Every decent man in the county will be on your trail. They won't lynch you—they'll tie you to an ant hill. You can't do a thing like this."

"They'll have to come a long way after us," the gambler told her, smiling. "And after one night with me in Mexico, I'm thinking that you'll be glad to send them back if they ever do come."

"Don't think it," the girl told him passionately. "If you touch me, I'll—I'll find a way to kill you myself. And Hugh Bennett will find you, no matter where you go. He'll hunt you down and kill you, if it takes him all his life!"

As she spoke she knew suddenly that her words were true. And with the knowledge came an overwhelming warm longing for Bennett. Whatever his faults or his sins, she knew now that she wanted him anyway, wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything or anybody in all her life.

Then she became aware that her remark had provoked a burst of harsh laughter from the group around her. "Your friend Bennett is dead," Pardee told her. "He accidentally got himself in the way of a bullet this afternoon."

"Oh!" the girl cried weakly. "It isn't true. I don't believe you."

Spike Wolf spoke up. "It happened to be my bullet he got in the way of," he said dryly. "So there ain't any mistake about it."

"You ought to be glad of it," Pardee said, watching her closely. "He's the hombre that killed your dad."

"It's a lie! It's a lie!" the girl cried out passionately. But after that she was silent, stunned. She sat in that same, stunned, tortured silence while another rider came up and entered—a man she had seen several times in town and whom she had thought was a cattle buyer. Her sudden hope that he might be someone who would help her was dashed when the conversation told her that the man had come merely to buy the "goods" which the gang had brought up from the Border.

Opium! She had never guessed. And the knowledge brought her utter despair, for she realized for the first time exactly what kind of men these were.

After a little, the newcomer and the several men with him rode off, having left a heavy sheaf of greenbacks in the center of the table.

Stud Pardee sat down before them. "Come on, boys," he said jovially. "We'll split her up." As he spoke he reached out for the bills.

Lissa saw Spike Wolf exchange a glance with the other men. Then the gunman said: "Wait a minute, Stud. We ain't dividin' up tonight, just as usual." As he spoke his hand flashed in an easy, supple movement which brought a sixgun into play.

STUD PARDEE'S hand quivered, moved ever so slightly in the direction of his shoulder hide-out, and then was still. He saw his draw would be too late. He turned hard, menacing eyes on the gunman.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he

rasped in a voice like the crack of breaking ice.

"What I'm sayin'," Spike told him meeting his gaze steadily. "You're pullin' out. We don't see no reason why you ought to have the big cut like you used to have. We're splittin' it, even-steven."

Pardee's eyes narrowed to conceal the killer light leaping in them. "We?" he grated out. "You speakin' for everybody?"

"Shore," one of the other men rapped out, emboldened by Spike's lead. "We're declarin' a new deal all around. You're quittin'. You ain't no use to anybody no more."

The others joined in a harsh assent.

Pardee looked from one to the other, contempt and anger equally in his gaze. "You're forgettin' a lot of things, I think," he said with sudden quietness, "but all right. I'm not goin to shoot it out with you for a little dinero. Go ahead and make your split. I'll take mine with the rest of you."

For the merest fraction of a second his cold, narrowed eyes strayed to the gun in Spike's hand, and Lissa knew from the latter's expression that he had seen it. She saw the gunman's eyes flare yellow in comprehension and knew that Spike sensed what she did, that Stud Pardee had not given up so easily as he appeared to do.

Spike's glance went to the girl, then back to Pardee in sudden determination. "We're takin' the girl too," he announced deadly. "We been needin' a woman around here for some time."

"Yeah, that's right," the man who had supported Spike spoke up, grinning at her. "She's too pretty a piece to let git away into Mexico."

The other four growled assent.

But Stud Pardee, whatever his faults, did not lack guts. Faced by certain death at the hands of the pack which had turned against him, he still did not hesitate.

"Take the girl, will you?" he snarled suddenly. "You crawlin' yellow skunks!" Like the strike of two angry rattlers, his hands moved, one to the armpit holster, the other to the gun at his hip.

The heavy Colt in Spike Wolf's hand bellowed, deafening in the narrow space of the room. Stud Pardee's body jerked, and a cough came from him, like a man whose breath had been suddenly knocked out. His hands, flashing with guns,

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checked an instant, wavered—and steadied, belching thunder.

The other five had clawed for iron in the same instant, wavered—and steadied, belching thunder.

The other five had clawed for iron in the same instant. Guns flashed out, leveled. Then the door swung in, as though a furious gust of wind had struck it, and a lean figure stepped through. "With you, Stud!" he rapped out, as the gun in his right hand roared and rocked.

Spike Wolf clutched his belly, suddenly, sank to his knees, guns falling from his hands. Pardee, swaying on his feet, thumbed his Colts in a steady, staccato beat. The room was a pandemonium of thunderous sound, of curling smoke and weaving bodies.

"Hugh! Hugh!" Lissa cried out, scarcely knowing that she spoke.

But Hugh Bennett, dust-covered, head bloody, eyes flaming, had no time for her now. Every part of his consciousness was riveted on the bellowing, deadly Colt in his hand and the five slit-eyed figures who flung death at him and Stud Pardee.

Even as Lissa cried out, another figure came plunging through the door, sudden guns spitting fire—a tall, wild, gray-haired figure, dressed in the ragged get-up of an old desert rat, whose gray eyes flared cold death and who handled his Colts like a gunman born.

Eyes, wide, unbelieving, hands clasped to her heart, she heard him cry out: "Give 'em hell, Hugh, son! I'm with you!

ONE of the gang flung up his hands and plunged headlong to the floor, a small black hole in his forehead. Another sank to his knees, coughing his life out in a smother of blood. Pardee was down on his knees, fighting ineffectually to get his guns leveled again. But his hands dropped and he fell on his face. It seemed to Lissa that he was dead before he hit the floor.

Two more of the gang were down. The tall man, dressed like a desert-rat, had blood on his face. Hugh Bennett's shirt over the left shoulder was stained red; blood streaming from a wound in his thigh.

The remaining member of the gang dropped empty guns, raising his hands over his head, just as Hugh Bennett whirled on Whiskey Jack who had been firing from the shelter of the bar. The last shell in Bennett's gun thundered, smashing into the fat man's face. He slumped face downward on the bar, then slid heavily to the floor.

Bennett, face grim, limped to where Spike Wolf, writhing in agony with a slug in his stomach, had reached for one of his fallen guns and was trying to level it. Hugh kicked it out of his hand.

The girl flung herself into the arms of the tall man. "Daddy! Daddy!" she sobbed. "I thought you were dead!"

From the floor Spike Wolf, in another tone, was saying much the same thing to Hugh Bennett. "You—you dirty law-skunk," he gasped, snarling. "You—you're dead!"

"There was a manzanita stump stickin' out about ten feet below the rim, Spike," Bennett told him grimly. "I fell on it, but even at that, when I came to I couldn't ever have gotten up, if you hadn't been kind enough to leave your lariat around Meteor's neck. I woke up to find him lookin' over the rim at me, and the lass rope hanging down within reach. Meteor pulled me up."

"The damn—wild cat—nearly killed me," Spike gasped, in a kind of wondering indignation. That expression of astonishment and anger was the last he ever showed. He slumped to the floor, and did not move again.

Jethro Harbin was explaining to his daughter: "They had me framed so it was sure disgrace, honey. I was sure Stud

(Continued on page 126)

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren

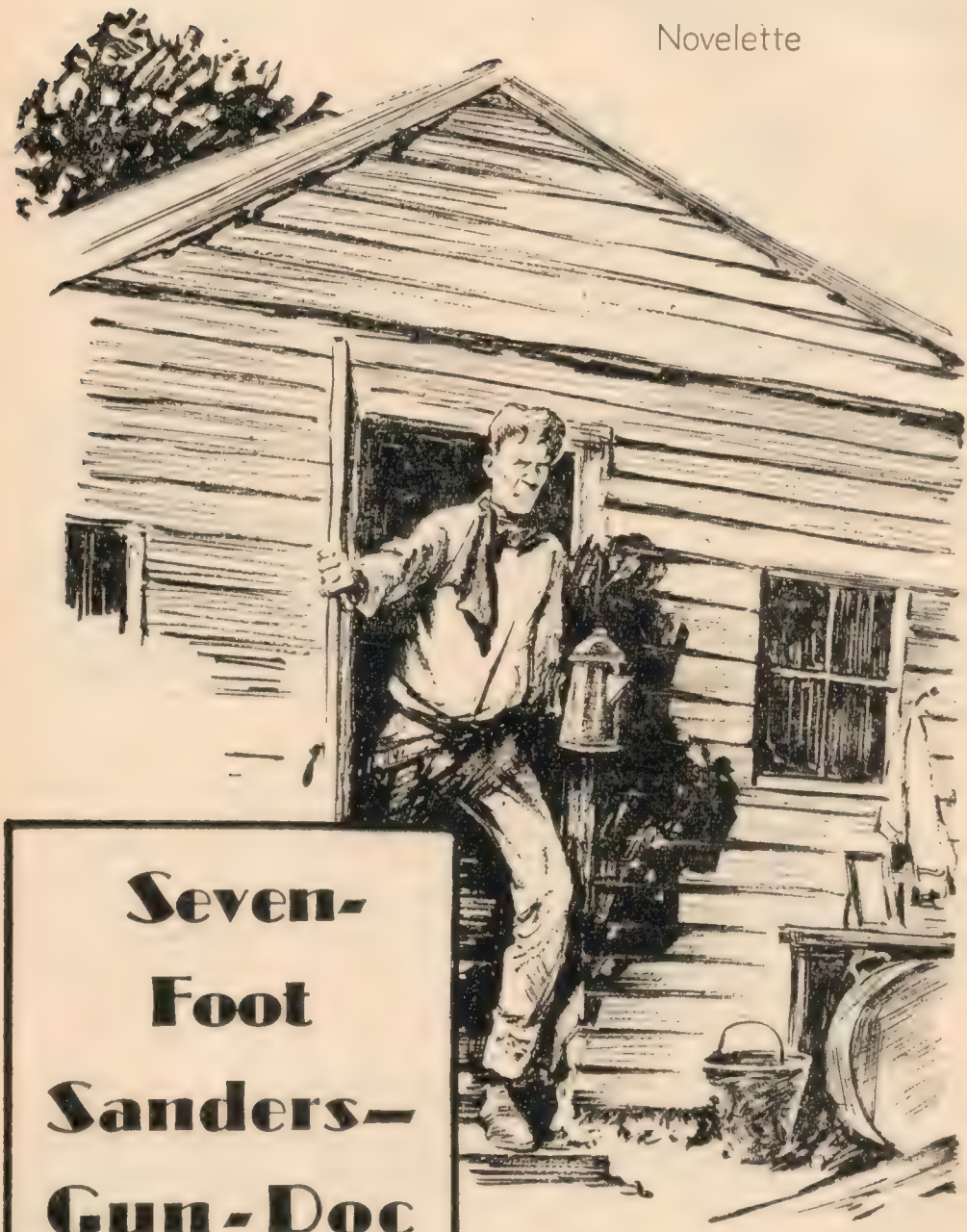
Ben Holliday, founder of the Overland Stage Company, was on his way to Atchison, Kansas, when his stage was stopped by road agents. While Holliday's pockets were being searched, he felt a twitching at the tip of his nose. Tears came to his eyes and he gasped. "My nose itches! I've got to scratch it." The gunman warned him, "Keep those hands up!" Holliday could stand the itching no longer and again asked for permission to scratch. The gunman softened. He pushed his gun close to Holliday's nose and ordered, "Go on scratch it." Holliday leaned forward and relieved the itch by rubbing it against the muzzle of the gun.

The most frequent question asked of John Hanse, who lived on the rim of the Grand Canyon, was how he was able to get water to irrigate his garden. Hanse would reply, "I get my water from the Colorado River. Heck, it's only about five thousand feet below here." Hanse would then be asked how he got the water up. "Easy," he'd say. "I have a mighty powerful telescope and I just sit on the rim of the Canyon and with my telescope bring the water up to about eighteen feet of the top." The startled visitor would invariably ask Hanse how he brought it up from that point. Old John was ready for that one. "I just syphon it the rest of the way."

Judge Harvey P. Ames of Montana always gave credit to the U. S. Army for his reformation from a "liquor-lovin' tumbleweed to a top-hatted judge." Once after three days of heavy drinking, Ames stared out of a saloon window. Coming down the street was a pack of the strangest critters—double-humped devils. When he sobered up he learned the queer looking animals were real. The Army had imported several hundred camels from central Asia thinking they would be better than mules or horses for military maneuvers. The army recorded the experiment as a dismal failure, but for Ames it was a huge success.

Nevada's Governor Blaisdell was on his way to the state capitol when he suddenly developed a severe stomach ache. He was carried to a nearby inn. The innkeeper, who had recently cured colic in one of his horses, gave the sick man a spoonful of the same medicine. By morning, the Governor was good as new. The innkeeper, greatly impressed by his own skill, promptly hung out his shingle as doctor. His medical career was short-lived. A bleeding gunman, with three bullet holes in his chest, crawled to the doc. The doc prescribed his sure-fire colic medicine. The enraged gunman took the bottle and broke it over the medico's head. The shingle came down in the morning.

Man-Sized
Seven-Foot Sanders
Novelette



Seven-Foot Sanders—Gun-Doc

By BILL COLSON

Seven-Foot pushed open the screen door.

Our old friend Seven-Foot Sanders sets himself the hopeless task of convincing a kid gun-slammer that shooting ain't the sure cure for the disease known as rustler-itis!

CHAPTER ONE

Hot Pot of Doughgod

SEVEN-FOOT Sanders planted one size twelve boot on the dashboard and the other on the brake lever, and he brought the Concord into Antelope Station at a keen run, the six-horse team laying into the collars with a will. He played them like fish on a line, swung them into the stage stop with a flourish and a shriek of brakes.

The big box body bounded on its

"You skinny old baboon! I'll nail your hide to a fence post for this!"

springs, and the steps were spotted within six inches of where they had been the day before. He was that kind of a driver, Seven-Foot.

He uncoiled his six-foot-eight of lankiness, came unfolding down over the high front wheel, and he grinned genially at the hostler who came for the horses.

"How'd it go?" inquired the hostler.

"Like a silk ribbon," returned Seven-Foot. "I'd check that off-wheeler, though. Acts like he might have a shoe loosenin' up on him."

The hostler nodded, then paused and called over his shoulder.

"Man says there's a letter for you at the hotel. Come in on the South stage this noon."

"Now I do wonder," mused Seven-Foot aloud, "who among them that I know, would know how to write?"

"Prob'ly your old man, tellin' you it's all right," retorted the hostler.

"All right to what?" inquired Seven-Foot.

"All right for you to come home," the hostler shouted gleefully. "The limb's growed back, that you swung out on, you big ape, and you can get back now, without them havin' to lower a rope!"

Seven-Foot's sixteen-foot lash made a pistol crack six inches behind the hostler's posterior as it disappeared inside the barn at great speed. He chuckled and stalked toward the hotel on his long stilt legs.

He read his letter at the hotel, with the clerk watching inquisitively, and suddenly the clerk took an unconscious half step back at Seven-Foot's deadly glare. It took a second for it to sink in that Seven-Foot wasn't really seeing him. He was simply staring blankly ahead, and the clerk happened to be in the way.

The clerk afterward reported, "You ever look into a smelter blast? Well, that was the way his eyes was. Hot enough to take hide off."

But now Seven-Foot was folding the letter with a stiff precision, and stalking toward the stairs. He took the stairs easily, two at a time, and he entered his room and stood abstractedly a long moment, staring holes in the unoffending water pitcher. Then he was dragging his war bag out from under the bed and changing clothes.

He put on a clean shirt and a black string tie, and a creased black coat. He shook the folds out of another pair of trousers and changed. Last of all, he dug up a cedar-butted Colt .44, spun the cylinder to check the loads, and thrust it under his trouser waistband, out of sight on the left side.

HE LOOKED at his watch, began tossing the discarded garments carelessly into the warbag. He spent fifteen minutes composing and addressing a letter. Then he sat, patient and inscrutable as an Indian, for a full hour.

He stalked into the stage station as the Southbound stage was brought around to the front.

The agent looked up, gave a little grunt at the sight of Seven-Foot.

"Well, now," he said. "You look real purty, when you git your harness on. Now what you need is a nice silver-plated bridle—"

"I'm quittin'," said Seven-Foot gruffly. "If you can pay me off now, all right, but if you can't send it after me."

The agent shed his joshing smile slowly. "Somethin' wrong, Seven-Foot?"

"Friend of mine's in trouble. I'm taking the stage out. Little burg name of Ardent, south. I'm sorry to leave you short-handed like this, but—"

"I hate it too. Don't catch skinners like you every day. You're job'll be waitin' when you come back, if you want it."

"I'm obliged," said Seven-Foot gratefully, and stalked out to the stage coach, "to ride as a passenger for the first time in

many a day. Wonder how it'll feel?"

It was a rough ride. Seven-Foot wasn't quite as long as his name, but he didn't miss it far, and his two hundred pounds were spread too thin over his bony frame to allow for padding. He jackknifed in the narrow, hard seat, and braced himself with his long, stilt-like legs, and endured the hammering of the rough road with stoic patience.

Oscar Borman was an old friend. They had been neighbors back in Missouri, a pair of half-wild colts whose trails had split about the time they both came of shaving age.

Oscar had hooked into double harness with Molly Crayborn, and Seven-Foot had gotten the itch in his size twelves that had never left him. Now Oscar was in trouble. It never occurred to Seven-Foot to ignore the plea for help that was in Oscar Borman's letter.

Seven-Foot worked his way out through the narrow door of the coach at Ardent, swore mildly as he knocked his hat off, and stretched a long arm back inside to get his warbag. He left it in the stage office and took in the town.

It wasn't much. One long street. A scattering of houses at each end of the street, with the center portion of the town given over to business. A livery, a blacksmith shop, two stores, three saloons, a harness and saddle shop a squat square building with HOTEL over the doorway.

I'd like to have the royalties from the bird that laid out the pattern, Seven-Foot thought with a half-humorous quirk. He'd hit half a hundred of these little cow towns, and they were all cut from the same bolt of cloth.

He bought a drink at the nearest saloon, and inquired, "How do I get to Oscar Borman's spread?"

THE BAR man was making a mopping circle on the bar top with a wadded cloth, and the motion stopped abruptly. He stared at Seven-Foot and made a sound in his throat that defied classification.

"Look," said Seven-Foot gently, "I didn't call you a dirty name. I just want to know where I can find Oscar Borman."

The barman's joints came unstuck again, and the bar cloth resumed its circling motion.

"You bring a shovel with you?" the barman asked sourly.

"Shovel?"

The barman's eyes flicked up at Seven-Foot and away. "You'll need one," he said shortly. "They just planted Oscar this morning, and from the size of the hole in him, I'd say he wasn't going to get out by himself."

The barman suddenly turned an interesting shade of green. He seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. Which was understandable, in a way. His string tie, collar, part of his shirt front, and a little of the loose skin of his neck were all snuggled a little bit tighter than could be called cozy in the grip of Seven-Foot's huge paw.

He wasn't a small man, the bartender, but he found himself unable to touch the floor with his feet, and Seven-Foot's bony, horsy face was very close, and something in his earnest expression caused the greenish tint to spread from the barman's face clear to the tips of his ears.

"Who," inquired Seven-Foot Sanders very softly, "shot Oscar?"

The barman's mouth moved rapidly, and his hands gestured freely, but no sound came from his lips. His eyes were like two small bloodshot onions, trying to force their way from between puffy lids. Seven-Foot relaxed his grip, and wind whooshed back into the man's starved lungs.

"You big ape," he said bitterly, and he reached for something under the bar. Seven-Foot's huge hand came out again, and the man retreated until he fetched up

against the back bar. "All right," he said hoarsely. "All right. But you keep your hands off of me, or you're liable to wind up in the hole next to Oscar."

"Who did it?" demanded Seven-Foot implacably.

"Don't know. His kid found him, and brought him in, but he never come to. He was shot yesterday, and died last night, and they planted him this morning, and that's all I know about it."

Seven-Foot regarded him soberly for a long moment. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "Oscar was a friend of mine." He rang a five dollar gold piece on the bar. "Buy yourself a new shirt," he said, "and have a drink on me."

THE LAST of the green faded from the man's face, and he raked the coin into the till and set up two shot glasses. He ducked his chin a little to get it all the way down, and said one final word.

"If you're a friend of Oscar's" he said, "don't go walking around with your eyes shut."

"Thanks," said Seven-Foot drily, "I appreciate that."

"Talk's cheap," said the bar man. "If that was all I ever gave the customers for change, I'd be a rich man."

Seven-Foot detested riding horseback. Few saddles would fit him, and few horses cared to carry him. So the last ten miles to the spread of the late Oscar Borman were covered with a sad lack of recipcrocal regard between Seven-Foot and the beast he bestrode.

The livery plug disliked being so far from home after dark, and Seven-Foot had that abused feeling in the region of his hip pockets. He spoke bitterly about it as he pulled up by a dimly-seen pole corral and stepped down.

Then he froze, with one huge boot still inches from the ground, reared up against the faint light of the horizon like a tremendous ungainly scarecrow. For directly behind him he caught a tell-tale *click-caluck* that was a gun hammer being eared back to full cock.

A voice, that seemed to have the fullest confidence that it would be obeyed, said, "Just stay put, right there."

Time ticked along for several long seconds. Then Seven-Foot said drily, "If you're going to shoot, I'd appreciate it if you'd do it now, while I'm still numb."

The voice said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Seven-Foot Sanders."

"That the same as Sam Sanders?"

"Samuel is my middle name. I wouldn't tell you my first name if you paid me." He had the voice located now, in a clump of hard black shadow that filled an angle of the corral fence. He went on, "I got a letter from Oscar Borman. You his boy?"

There was a long pause, and then the voice came again.

It said grudgingly, "All right. Walk on up to the house."

Seven-Foot walked.

He waited until light bloomed around him, as a lamp was lighted, and then he turned. Oscar's son wasn't a day over fifteen, but the gun in his hand was man-sized, and the lad handled it with a practiced ease. He was thin, almost skinny, with a face that showed a pale stress of emotion, and his eyes were like Oscar's, a pale, almost washed-out blue.

He eyed Seven-Foot slowly, and then, almost grudgingly, slid the gun away into a holster tied down on one lean thigh. Seven-Foot fought to keep his face straight.

Somehow, it looked funny to him, this lad, not much more than a child, and the big slick holster sagging with the weight of the gun swung low for a quick draw. Then he got another look at the kid's pale, set face, and the humor slid out of him.

HE SAID gently, "Son, I can't tell you how sorry I am about Oscar. Him and me—well, we been friends for a plenty

long time. I'm here to do whatever I can for him."

A startling twist came in the kid's thin lips.

"So you're going to be like the rest of them," he said. "You're going to sniffle over the pore little orphan kid, and decide who's going to board him out, An' of course, since he ain't got no kinfolks, somebody's got to look after his interests. You go to hell!"

"Now, wait a minute," protested Seven-Foot. "Nobody said—"

The kid's pale blue eyes blazed. "I said hell with you! I've been riding alongside my old man since I was twelve. I run the place when he was laid up, and I'll run it now. And you can take your goody-goody talk and stick it—"

"Hold it," said Seven-Foot hastily, "just hold it one minute." Despite himself, he felt a grin coming on his bony face. If this little cockerel wasn't a dead ringer for his old rooster of a daddy, he'd do till one came along.

"Now, look," he said pacifically, "I ain't hornin' into your business. Your dad wrote me he was having trouble, and I came. I'd like to find out who killed him. And since he ain't here no more, I'd like to do anything I can to give you a hand, but I ain't hornin' into your business, understand that. Now, if I ain't bein' too presumptuous, I could do with a little bait. That jug head out in the corral shook me down so I'm plumb gaunted."

A little of the stiffness went out of the kid's face, as he remembered his inbred cow-country manners. "Sure," he said. "I haven't et either. Reckon I had too many things on my mind."

There were beans in a pot on the back of the stove, and between them, they fried up potatoes and bacon and made a pot of coffee. During their work, the kid gave his name as Ben.

They ate silently, and then washed up the dishes. Afterward, Seven-Foot sat in a tilted kitchen chair, with his enormous length of leg comfortably stretched out beside the stove, a brown-paper cigarette pasted in the corner of his wide mouth.

He blew smoke toward the ceiling and inquired casually, "How's the place stocked, Ben?"

The lad said stiffly, "It ain't no great shakes. We had a bad winter, and lost maybe half. They'd tally about two hundred head right now, mixed." His pale blue eyes flicked across Seven-Foot's face and went on past. "They'll do better when I take over the ravine country, south."

Seven-Foot pursed his lips and kept the irony carefully out of his voice. "You're going to spread a little?"

THE KID retorted almost savagely, "Yes, by George, I am! I'm goin' to take back the hunk that George Masters took, and I'm goin' to graze it. And if he sticks his fat face into it, I'm goin' to blow it off his worthless neck."

"Masters," said Seven-Foot reflectively, "Masters. Seems to me your dad wrote me something about him once before. Ain't he your neighbor, here?"

"Yeah," said Ben shortly. "He's big, and he's a hog. He hammered at Dad for years, and finally took over the best part of our grass. And if that wasn't enough, he talked it around that Dad was tied in with the wild bunch, back in the Hole."

"And," inquired Seven-Foot softly, his eyes sharply on the lad's face, "was he?"

A slow flush came on the boy's face. "Dad was straight as a string," he said. "If you was a friend of his, you'd know that. But he never asked a man what his business was, if he dropped in for a bait, and he wasn't damn fool enough to ask where he got his horse.

"If anybody'd rustled our stock, we'd have gone after it, and asked nobody for help neither. But George Masters, *he* got up his Association, and he made it pretty plain that if you wasn't with him, you was

ag'in him, and that's the kind of a fat slob he is."

"And Oscar didn't go into the Association?"

"Dad killed his own snakes," the kid said briefly. "He said nobody stole from him without answering to him personal, and he figured that a big spread could hold its own without anybody else doing its dirty work." The kid shrugged and said, "That's the way he was, and that's the way I am."

"So," said Seven-Foot drily, "it would seem."

CHAPTER TWO

On the Prod

HE WAS dishing up breakfast when he missed the kid. One second Ben was at the stove, and the next, he was gone. Then he heard an alarmed voice outside cry out, "Point that thing the other way. Do you want it to go off and hurt somebody?"

Seven-Foot took three long strides, and was at the screened kitchen door.

A newcomer stood there, a chunky, well-set-up man, with an innocent cherubic face, just now screwed up in a worried scowl. Ben stood facing the newcomer, the big gun held level, trained on the cherubic-faced man's belt buckle.

The man caught sight of Seven-Foot suddenly, and yelled, "Dammit, Long Feller, call off your dog. Where does he come off with this stuff?"

Ben demanded, without taking his eyes off the man, "Do you know him, Seven-Foot?"

Seven-Foot said blandly, "Never saw him before in my life."

The stocky one's mouth fell open. His eyes bulged. He made wheezing sounds. Then he exploded.

"You skinny baboon," he shrieked, "I'll nail your hide on the fence for this! I'll hang your scalp on my coupstick, and dance on your grave! As sure as my name is Shorty Shamrock, I'll pay you for this—"

Seven-Foot gave a sudden violent start, and pushed the screen door open. He stalked across the bare dirt yard, shading his squinted eyes with one huge flat hand. He stalked up to within three feet of the man, without however, interfering with Ben's line of fire, and bent down to peer intently into the other's outraged face.

Finally he said slowly and reluctantly, "We-l-l-l, it must be. I only saw one uglier face in my life, and he'd been kicked by a horse. So I guess you must be Shorty."

"Must be!" shrieked the shorter man. "Must be! May your soul rot in hell for forty thousand years, Seven-Foot. May that lump of fat between your ears melt and run down your skinny neck and drown you! You know who I am—and what's the big idea?"

Seven-Foot said seriously, jerking his head at Ben, "That's Wild Bill Hickok—in his younger days. He can shoot the buttons right off your shirt, so don't make any sudden moves." He turned back to Ben.

"This here," he said, jerking a thumb at Shorty, "is a bird that trails around with me sometimes. He's a little simple-minded, from having been dropped on his head, but he's all right unless he gets violent. Just humor him along, and—" He voiced a terrific grunt as Shorty's boot thudded into his lean backside.

"Now that," said Seven-Foot sadly, "was unkind." He made a shocked face at Shorty's unprintable retort.

LATER, with Shorty back at his normal good humor and with a belly full of grub, they talked. Ben was working outside at the corral.

"This button," said Seven-Foot, "reminds me of his old man in his younger

days. He's independent as a hog on ice, and twice as touchy. I like to see a kid independent, but he's been hit hard, and I don't like the way he thinks, about some things."

"Amen," said Shorty, "and likewise. Do you know that kid stepped out and flang that gun on me before I could take a deep breath? I've seen some catty gun-slingers, here and there, but that kid is just plain chain lightning. And him not a day past fifteen."

"Yeh," said Seven-Foot shortly, "and I keep thinking about Billy Bonney—the one they called Billy the Kid. Big enough to handle a gun like a wizard—too young to have any sense in using it. They say he killed a man for every year of his age, before he was old enough to vote. I'd hate to think that Oscar Borman was looking over my shoulder, and me letting a kid of his go like that."

Shorty snorted derisively. "What," he demanded, "do you think you've got to say about it? You speak up to this kid like a Dutch uncle, and he'll climb you and beat you down to my size whilst you're getting your breath."

Seven-Foot carefully rolled a brown paper cigarette, his big thick fingers deft and sure with the cylinder. He stuck it in the corner of his wide mouth and fired up.

"Now, as I see it—"

"Katy, bar the door," sighed Shorty, "here we go again."

"As I see it," repeated Seven-Foot, ignoring his partner's sigh, "the kid is going to run head-on into the Association. And if he gits lippy with them ranchers, and you know he will, he's in for trouble. Some one of 'em will go to slap him down, and likely as not, the kid'll shoot a hole you could haze a mule through, in the gentleman's belly. The kid's got what he considers friends in the wild bunch, and boom, the first move he makes, that's where he'll be, if he don't stretch rope first."

"And," retorted Shorty sarcastically "you're going to take him by the hot little hand, and lead him down the straight and narrow. You give me a pain in the pistol-pocket."

"No," said Seven-Foot slowly, "I ain't going to lead him nowhere. But I think the kid could stand a little education. He's got his mind made up, though he ain't said it in so many words, that the wild bunch is his friends, and that the ranchers are out to git him. I'd like to let him find out about honor among thieves. And that's where you come in."

"Now, look," protested Shorty, straightening up in alarm, "I ain't—"

"Oh, yes you are." Seven-Foot brought the front legs of his chair to the floor, and leaned forward, his big horsey face wrinkled persuasively. "Now, here's what you do."

A POMPOUS, pot-bellied little jug of a man came to the Borman spread the next day. He wheezed asthmatically, coughed frequently over the smoke of the villainous black stogie he smoked, and finally made it clear that he was the tax collector, and that there was a seventy-five dollar assessment against the place, due immediately, if not sooner.

The kid listened, nodded, and said, "I'll be in town in a couple of days. I'll bring it in then."

The little jug wheezed again, made a note on the papers, and drove off, sitting bolt upright in his trim little buggy, the whip cocked at exactly ten degrees off perpendicular.

Seven-Foot asked carelessly, "You going to make a gather?" The kid nodded.

"I'll need a little money, anyway," he said. "I'm going to cut out about ten head and sell 'em. That ought to carry me till fall shipping."

To which Shorty said heartily, "Well, we're going to have to pull out pretty soon, so why don't we give you a hand on

the gather? Take a full count of everything you got, so you know where you stand? It'd be tough going to do it alone, but with the three of us, we ought to be able to do it in a day or so."

Thus it came about, that Seven-Foot Sanders and Shorty Shamrock put in a couple of long, hard, saddle-pounding days, popping reluctant critters out of the brush, driving them in bunches to the holding ground, finally tallying and checking brands.

It was dusk before they were done, and they pulled out from the little flat, knowing the cattle would disperse as they saw fit. The tally was one hundred thirty-eight head, mixed. Just about half of what it should have been.

Young Ben was in a cold, speechless fury when the count was finished. He led the way back to the house, and as silently helped with the cooking.

He got up from the table, stalked out to the corral, and saddled up. Seven-Foot drifted out behind him.

"What's up, Ben?" he inquired casually.

"I'm goin' to get me some answers from that fat slob Masters." He tightened the last strap and swung up.

Seven-Foot shrugged, and made a long arm to drag his own saddle off the corral fence. He stopped to exchange a few words with Shorty, then rode out and caught up with the kid, who gave him one pale withdrawn look, but accepted his presence without further ado.

CHAPTER THREE

On the Dodge

IT WAS cross-country riding, at a comfortable jog, through rocky ground, then scrub, across a deep ravine, and out into more scrub. The moon came out, and the country lay under a ghostly faint light, when they came onto a loose scatter of cattle. They stood there quietly.

The kid stopped, seemed to consider, then shook out his rope. He took a short run, dabbed his loop on a startled cow, and dumped her expertly. He was just striking a match, and bending over to inspect the brand, when the shot bellowed out, and the bullet took a shrilling *poo-hee-e-eeee* as it ricocheted off hard-baked earth. A roaring voice yelled,

"Over here, boys! Rustlers—over here!"

Three more shots came right behind that, and Seven-Foot bent himself prayerfully in the saddle and pounded out into the night, with the hard-riding kid at his back. Twice more they heard the deadly ripping of too-close slugs, and then they hit the darkness of the ravine.

"Whoosh!" quoth Seven-Foot. "Whoosh, whoosh—and whoosh!" There was a murmur of hard riding behind them, and the kid's hand came up suddenly, and spat a yard-long lance of flame back into the darkness. Seven-Foot made a wide teetering grab, and slapped the gun down.

"You idiot!" he snapped. "Why don't you git down and light a fire? Or wave your hat and whistle *Dixie?*" He saw the kid's face turn toward him, not sure whether it was any paler than usual, but he imagined it was. He reached out and slashed the kid's mount on the rump with his hat.

As they followed the twisting of the ravine, pounding along in the dark, he rasped out, "What do you think the Association does to rustlers? Slap them on the wrist, and say 'Naughty, naughty'?"

The kid's thin voice floated back over his shoulder. "We wasn't rustling."

Seven-Foot shouted wrathfully, "You stop and tell 'em that. This shirt is a keepsake from my grandpaw, and I don't want to get no holes in it." The only sound he heard after that was the scrambling of the horses, and their gusty breathing.

They kegged up in a cluster of jagged boulders before daybreak, and huddled back to back, straining and listening, but no sound of pursuit came to them. Several times, Seven-Foot felt the kid shiver, and once he caught a quickly suppressed chattering of teeth.

At daybreak, Seven-Foot said, "Guess we shook 'em." He straightened up, lifted his arms and started a yawning stretch—and a bullet screamed off the boulder beside him. He dropped with more speed than grace.

He made a squatting run across the little pocket in the rocks and turned the lad by the shoulder and pushed him toward the horses.

"Move out," he said. "Climb your nag and break for it whilst I smoke 'em up a little back there. An' don't stop, not for nothing!"

The kid protested instantly. His face was white, and a little of the night's coldness still quivered down his arms, but he said tightly, "Hell with it. You ride, and I'll cover you."

Seven-Foot grabbed him by the shoulder with an ungentle paw, and squeezed and pushed at the same time. "You git!" he said positively. "I know this game better than you do. An' don't worry, I'll be right behind you. Now move!"

Another slug made its nasty ripping sound in the air overhead, and he shoved the kid away. He brought out the cedar-butted .44, put five carefully spaced shots back toward the sound of the rifle, and made a shambling run for his own horse. He swung up and put the horse at a gravel-scratching run, leaning low over the animal's neck.

The air was full of sound as a hatful of Winchester slugs winged by. He found the kid swinging to come back, around the first bend. Despite himself, Seven-Foot felt a little warm glow coming inside. This kid would do to ride the river with. But he warped his bony face into a stiff mask and yelled at the kid to keep moving. They covered a lot of ground, that morning.

THEY kegged up about noon, in a thicket of fir, pushing deep into the heart of the clump of bushy saplings. Seven-Foot stepped down and stretched, his spine straightening out in a running series of bony cracks. He vented a long sigh of heartfelt gratitude. The kid got down stiffly, and made a quick grab at the saddle horn as his knees shook under him. His face was a grayish white, and the soft pouches under his eyes were dark.

Seven-Foot gave him a quick side-glance and somberly rolled himself a cigarette, which he stuck in his mouth without lighting. Then he got up, stalked to his horse, and stripped off the saddle and blanket.

He rubbed the animal down with a fistful of feathery balsam ends, and spread the blanket to dry over a bush. He waited until Ben had done the same, and inquired, "How do we get to this Hole, where the wild bunch hang out?" The kid looked up sharply.

Seven-Foot went on gruffly, "These nags ain't going to carry us much longer. And I don't know about you, but my stummick's beginning to think my throat's been cut."

The lad said almost uncertainly, pointing to the west, "The Hole's over that way. But won't those birds figger on us making for it? They'll be set for us."

Seven-Foot retorted grumblingly, "They're likely to be most anywhere. We'll have to chance that."

Then he stiffened suddenly, said softly, "Hush." There was a rustle in the needles that floored the earth here, and a flick of brown fur as a rabbit hopped from the shelter of one sapling to another. The kid's fingernails clicked against the butt of his gun, but Seven-Foot whispered harshly,

"No. You'll have 'em on our necks."

He found a dry limb, an inch through and two feet long, and moved with astonishing speed and quiet for his size. He disappeared into the saplings, the kid heard a sudden little thump, and Seven-Foot came back with the rabbit dangling in one hand.

"When I was a kid in Missouri," he grinned, "all the recipe books started off with, 'First catch your rabbit.' My brother Sid used to run alongside of 'em and feel their ribs first. That way, he didn't catch none but the fat ones." As he talked, he was skinning the rabbit, peeling the hide off like a glove, dressing it out with a few deft strokes of his knife.

He hung the small carcass on a limber limb of a sapling. "He'll go good when we get where we can build a little fire," he said. "Now, I reckon, we'd best bed down a little, and move out about dusk."

The afternoon wore on, and Seven-Foot roused Ben from a fitful doze and said gruffly, "Might as well move on."

THEY saddled up and moved out. The slope was quiet, but Seven-Foot swiveled his head constantly, testing the breeze, watching, listening. Once they thought they heard a distant shout, but nothing further happened, and they kept moving. They had gone perhaps a half mile, when the shot bellowed at them.

Seven-Foot grunted, and jerked forward in the saddle. He gigged his mount with his spurs, and made the scrub, the kid ahead of him, and then he pulled up and reeled forward again. He pulled a handkerchief out of his hip pocket and pressed it against his left shoulder. There was a confused shouting behind them, and the kid turned, saw Seven-Foot's distress, and wheeled to come back.

"Git!" snarled Seven-Foot savagely. "Keep going, you damn fool!" He bent forward again, and a thread of blood ran across his knuckles from the soggy handkerchief.

The kid's face was white and desperate in the dusk, and he said something rough and got out his gun, wheeling to cover Seven-Foot's back.

"Dammit," cried Seven-Foot harshly, "git! Don't hang back for me." He painfully brought out the .44, cocked it, and fired it almost under the nose of the kid's horse.

The horse screamed and reared, and wheeled away, and Seven-Foot let another shot off almost at its rump, to send it bolting into the brush. He saw the kid's pale face turned toward him, and then he slid carefully out of the saddle. He took a deep breath, sat down with his back against a sapling trunk, and waited.

Within the half minute, he heard a horse coming, at a cautious walk, heard the squeak of leather and jingle of metal as the rider dismounted.

Then Shorty Shamrock's voice demanded, "Well?" Then Shorty caught sight of the dark blot on Seven-Foot's shirt front and leaped forward. "What's the matter, Long Feller?" he demanded worriedly.

Seven-Foot sighed and sagged limply against the sapling. "I should have knowed better," he said in a hoarse whispering voice. "I should have told you to shoot *at* me, instead of telling you to shoot to miss. That way, you'd never have hit me in a hundred years."

Shorty made a strangled sound in his throat and dropped on his knees beside his lanky partner. "I never went to do it," he said, almost crying. "Swear to heaven, Seven-Foot, I aimed a foot over your head. So help me, I did."

Seven-Foot sighed again, and his head lolled forward on his chest. Shorty cried in an anguished voice, "Oh, hell!" and ran to grab the reins of his horse.

He led the animal alongside Seven-Foot, dropped the reins, and knelt in the near dark to raise Seven-Foot to a sitting position. Seven-Foot breathed noisily.

Shorty struggled with his elongated bulk, trying to handle him gently, and boosted him to his knees.

He got a grip around Seven-Foot's waist, grunted, and boosted him headfirst across the saddle. Seven-Foot slid on across, and collapsed bonelessly on the other side.

The horse shied away, and Shorty cursed it in a savage desperation, ran around its rump, again tried to manhandle Seven-Foot into the saddle. It was like an ant trying to handle a foot of wet spaghetti. As soon as he got one section straightened out, something else would buckle.

He made another effort, and again, the long lean man's body slithered away from him, and the horse shied away anew. Shorty brought the horse back, almost in a sobbing panic, and Seven-Foot suddenly sat up and said witheringly,

"If that's the best you can do, I'd just as soon walk."

Shorty stared.

Shorty gulped.

And very slowly, a surge of red started under his cherubic cheeks.

Shorty cursed, a violent, blistering curse that dripped an almost visible green vitriol in the near-dark. Even his horse shuddered and moved a step or two away. Seven-Foot wagged his head disbelievingly, and made deprecating clicking sounds with his tongue.

"You'll never get to heaven that way," he said sadly.

Shorty choked again. His round cheeks swelled and grew luminous. "You," he choked. "You—this—that—and the other —*you can go to hell!* Making me—acting like—Seven-Foot Sanders, you son-of-a-double-dashed these-those-and-them, I ought to kill you!"

Shorty wheeled away, stamping clear across the little opening, swinging his arms and muttering hoarsely. Seven-Foot wadded the handkerchief soaked with rabbit blood, and tossed it carelessly aside. "All right, Shorty," he said in a mollifying voice, "I owe you a drink. I didn't mean to give you that bad a turn."

Shorty snorted, "Hell with you. For two cents, I'd—"

Seven-Foot interrupted briskly, "Look, we got this job to finish. He's gaunted, and tired, and he ain't slept much. He's heading west into the Hole, and I think we might as well wind it up. I think he's had about enough."

Shorty muttered, and wagged his head, but he finally mounted, and waited silently while Seven-Foot caught his own mount. They rode out without further words.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Wild Bunch

THE KID was shivering—a bone-deep, body-wracking shiver, and he had to clamp his jaws to keep his teeth from chattering. His horse traveled at a tired walk, stumbling frequently, snorting breath hoarsely through its expanded nostrils. The dark pressed in around him, and the shirring whisper of the night breeze in the scrub held a note of lonely danger. Hunger griped at him, twisted his belly in knots, and his belt was drawn in to the last notch.

He was scared and cold and hungry, and for the first time in a long time, he realized that he was still only fifteen. He had a sudden shameful wish that he was nine again. He hadn't cried since he was nine.

He let the horse pick its own trail down over the rim into the hole, and the sound of the hoofs on the rock put a little stiffening into the kid's spine. He knew where the cabin was now, and they'd have grub and a place to sleep. He had a sudden remembrance of the twist of pain on Seven-Foot Sanders' bony face, and the

little chills rippled up his spine again, and then a little warmth of anger came up against the fear.

The cabin wasn't much. Rough rock and poles, snuggled into an overhang in the rimrock, so that there was only one way to come in on it. The horse's hoofs made a ringing on the smooth scarp of rock that paved the approach, and the kid pulled up and hailed the shack.

There was no sound at all for perhaps half a minute, and then a voice said, almost at his elbow, "Keep your hands on the horn—an' who is it?"

"Ben Borman."

"Huh?" There was a note of sudden surprise in the voice. "What t' hell you doin' here?"

"I'm on the dodge. They's a posse behind me."

The voice cursed violently, and snorted, "An' you headed 'em right here! Git down, and into the shack."

There were five of them, and he knew them all by sight. His father had fed them all, at one time or another. Rough-looking ones, with lines of strain on their unshaven faces, and quiet, unblinking eyes. In just the few seconds since he had come, they were all dressed, and hung with their guns.

They listened to his story, and then one of them said, "That tears it. Looks like we move out."

They were gathering up coats and slickers, their light warbags, and quite obviously stripping the cabin for flight.

The kid said in a faintly injured voice, "I could do with a bait of grub."

One of them grunted, "Grab whatever you see handy, then get to hell out. We got no time to mess with no snotnosed cubs."

"But I got to ride with you a ways." He tried to put his point over. "I'm on the dodge. They're after me."

His host wheeled on him and said explosively, "You damn fool, you're the one brung 'em on us. If you was man size, I'd bust you one on the noggin with a gun barrel!"

The kid's teeth gritted, and his shoulders stiffened.

"Yeah?" he said. "Well look here, bucko, don't—"

Someone caught him from behind, spun him around and shoved him roughly toward the door. "Git," said the man forcibly. "Just plain git!"

THEY left pretty much in a bunch, across the smooth rock approaches to the place, ready to scatter as they came out of the draw. Then a voice rode above the clatter of hoofs on rock.

"That's far enough," said the voice.

Behind the kid, a man cursed and reined savagely around, and a hollow ringing voice behind called, "We're behind you, too. Set tight!"

The rest of it was a nightmare. The invisible voice ahead touched off a pile of brush to make a big bonfire, and one by one, he ordered them ahead, to deposit their guns by the fire, while all the time the man stayed back in the dark, unseen.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Unanimously, they protested their innocence, reminding the unseen posse that the kid had been the one they'd trailed, that they, the wild bunch, had been sleeping peacefully in the cabin, and knew nothing of this doings until the kid rode in.

The posse seemed to be conferring, at least mumbled voices could be heard out in the dark, and finally the first voice said again, with genuine reluctance,

"All right. Ride out, all but the kid. But keep riding. We know your faces, and you'll stretch rope if we ever see them again."

They skirted the fire, these knights of the long loop, riding gingerly and cat-eyed past the fire, on out into the dark, and their suddenly sprinting horses made a distant running clatter. The kid stiffened,

feeling the bone-weariness and hunger and cold of the last day and a half of hard riding making a hard cold ball in his stomach. Despite himself, he felt his lips quivering as steps came up behind him.

Then the control over his lips broke. Seven-Foot Sanders stepped around him into the firelight and asked gently, "You had enough, son?"

Shorty Shamrock came out now, from the other side of the fire, his round, cherubic face quiet and serious.

The kid's lips twisted. "So you're with 'em too," he spat out. "All right, tell 'em to come and get me. Give me a gun, and I'll give 'em something to talk about, too."

Seven-Foot said, "There ain't no more of 'em, son. The only posse is me and Shorty, here."

"You see," Seven-Foot went on soberly, "we knew that we could talk till we got hoarse, trying to get you to see things straight. You'd seen the wild bunch ride in and out, and you'd fed 'em, and you thought they were friends of yours." He sighed. "Well, you seen how that worked out. They throwed you to the wolves without so much as a bite of grub or a kind word. That's the owlhoot, son, and it's every man for himself." The kid made a sound that Seven-Foot ignored.

"Now, I'd like to show you something else," said Seven-Foot. Almost numbly, the kid mounted his horse as he was directed, and followed. Dawn was making a glow of pink glory over the crest of the mountain when they stopped at the edge of a little meadow, hemmed by brush, backed by the rock rim of the Hole. A good hundred head of cattle grazed here, branded with a large and unmistakable OB, which had been Oscar's brand, and was now the kid's.

SEVEN-FOOT said quietly and implacably, "See 'em, kid? Them's the cows you was going down to shoot George Masters for. Only Masters didn't rustle 'em. Your 'friends' did."

Seven-Foot's voice suddenly took on a steel edge.

"You learned your lesson, kid? Has a little cold camp and dry camp and hungry camp showed you how the wild bunch make out? Or do you need some more?"

The kid's white face turned to the two of them, swinging slowly back and forth between them. He was remembering the vicious snarl of the slugs—that had missed, instead of tearing through his flesh. He remembered the scene by the fire, with the wild bunch throwing the whole trumped-up mess on his back. And he remembered the way his neck had cringed in anticipation of the hemp rope he had felt was coming.

His mouth formed a shaky smile. "Yes-sir," he said low voiced. "I think I've learned."

"Good," said Seven-Foot heartily. A wide grin split his horsy face.

They rode out, heading back the way they had come, and the kid said suddenly, and almost shyly, "You make me think of my old man sometimes."

Seven-Foot grinned. "We was raised together," he said. He lowered his voice and peered over his shoulder at Shorty.

"Tell you something," he said for the kid's ears alone. "Your grand-daddy, that you never knew, he pulled one almost like this on me and your daddy when we was a pair of wild kids. It cured us. So if you've got the same stuff in you that your daddy had—you'll do, son, you'll do."

The kid rode straighter in the saddle. Seven-Foot noted it, and winked at Shorty. They rode out of the Hole, stirrup to stirrup, and Shorty hummed a little tune that had to do with burying him not on the lone prairee.

The words were warm in the kid's thoughts.

"You'll do, kid, you'll do."

THE END

ANVIL ROCK SHOWDOWN

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Fast-Paced Gold Trail Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

One Year to Live

CORDREY rode farther into the desert that day than ever before, needing to be alone because of his bleak mood. It wasn't his health that troubled him now, but the nagging of his wife which made him appear to be a failure in his own eyes.

Indeed, he was regaining his strength here in the Arizona sun and he could be amused by that Philadelphia doctor's guess that, "maybe in a drier climate you'll

Cordrey saw Riordon lift the rifle slowly, and line it up on him.

last a year." It was nine months since he had come west, and Cordrey knew that he was well on his way to being cured.

He was what the natives called a lunger.

His wife just this morning had called him something worse than that.

Lil had screamed at him, "You're only half a man! You're a weakling and a failure—and any woman would despise you!"

That hurt, for John Cordrey was a man of pride, and a man of courage.

He had loved his wife, but these past nine months, while he was fighting for his life, and while she had hated every minute of it, Lil had turned into a stranger. A stranger who had come to hate him. That, of course, had done something to his love for her. He was a mild-mannered man, but her wild harangue this morning had almost driven him crazy. He'd left the house, ridden out, for he had feared that he might lose his sanity and kill her.

It was mid-afternoon now, and Cordrey was deep in a wasteland of rock, sand, and cactus. The only sign of life he saw were the vultures wheeling high against the brassy sky. Cordrey knew, of course, that they were more a sign of death than

There was gold at Anvil Rock—so the legend said. But Cordrey found that the legend had told only a fragment—and failed to mention the hot-lead gun-trap rigged for him by a pair of hidden gold-greedy killers!

of life. He guessed that there must be some dead or dying creature somewhere near. He hadn't considered that it might be a human being, and so, when the cry came, Cordrey was startled.

HE FOUND the man in an arroyo, an old man in ragged clothes, a shaggy-bearded desert rat of a man. He lay on his back, his faded eyes shielded from the sun by a shapeless hat, and his right foot bare. He'd removed his boot because of an injured ankle.

The ankle was swollen to three times its normal size and its color was bad. The old man was suffering from thirst. He was panting, and his tongue showed black between cracked lips. He barely had strength enough to lever himself up on his elbows to gaze at Cordrey.

Cordrey dismounted, took the canteen off his saddle horn, descended into the arroyo. He gave the old fellow a drink, and said, "Drink all you want, friend."

The suffering man looked as though he could hardly restrain himself, but he muttered, "In a little while. Not good to take too much all of a sudden." Cordrey had to admire the man's iron will. He couldn't have matched it.

They waited a little while, then the old man drank again—still sparingly. He sighed then, and smiled through his iron-gray beard. "Worth more than all the gold a man dreams of, just a little water."

"Prospector?" Cordrey asked.

"Sort of," came the guarded reply. "Sam Eberts. Old Sam, they call me." He looked at the sorrel horse up on the arroyo bank, then at Cordrey's clothes. Cordrey was wearing a flat-crowned gray Stetson and Justin boots, but his shirt and tweed trousers were strictly Eastern. "You're no cowhand."

Cordrey said that he wasn't, and gave his name.

He asked Old Sam how he happened to be there, hurt that way and with the buzzards wheeling overhead waiting for him to die.

"Had a run of bad luck," Old Sam explained. "Was prospecting—sort of—over in the Coffin Hills. Ran out of grub. Well, friend, I started for San Marcos day before yesterday. Hadn't traveled more than a couple miles before a sidewinder bites my old jenny mule. Old Martha was snake-bit plenty times before, but this time she dies on me. Fine critter too, that jug-head. Finer than some folks I know."

Old Sam paused, heaved a sigh.

"So I started hoofing it," he continued. "Yesterday I began to go lame. This morning my leg was beginning to swell up. By mid-morning I drank the last of my water. Had to throw my pack and canteen and rifle away, the going got to be so hard. I reached this here arroyo on my hands and knees, and if you hadn't showed up—well, Old Sam would've soon been buzzard bait. That's sure."

"I'll take you to San Marcos."

"You heading for there?"

"In that direction," Cordrey said. "My place is on Estampa Creek. The old Martinez ranch. I bought it about a year ago. Came out here for my health."

Old Sam slanted a look at him. "Didn't take you for a sick man," he said. "Figured you for an hombre with trouble."

Cordrey hadn't known his face was so readable. He felt a little ashamed, thinking that a man of character would show a blank face to the world. He was beginning to feel that he was what Lil claimed, a weakling.

"Let's get going," he said, almost curtly.

They rode double for a time, then, with the sorrel tiring, Cordrey got down and led the horse with Old Sam in the saddle. He was lost in his own unhappy thoughts much of the time, catching only a part of the old-timer's talk.

Old Sam said several times, with an old man's garrulousness, that he would

pay Cordrey for his trouble. He kept hinting that he wasn't a poor man. Then again he was worrying about his leg. He hadn't anybody to look after him, even in San Marcos, and he was afraid that he would be laid up. When he mentioned that a second time, Cordrey broke in, almost without thinking,

"You can stay at my place. Lil and I will look after you. Lil—that's my wife."

Old Sam took him up on that. "Sure is neighborly of you, friend."

Cordrey immediately realized that he had erred. Lil wasn't going to like it. She wasn't going to like it at all.

IT WAS long after dark when Cordrey reached home with his new-found friend. Old Sam seemed just that, a friend. Somehow John Cordrey, usually slow to make friends, felt as though he'd known the prospector a long time. But no lamplight glowed behind the windows of the squat adobe house, and alarm knifed through Cordrey until he noticed that his two other horses were still in the corral.

He had feared for a moment that Lil had packed her things, hitched up the buckboard, driven to town, caught the eastbound train for home. He had been scared that she had walked out on him. But of course, he realized tardily, there wasn't money enough in the house for train fare back to Philadelphia.

"Looks like your woman went to bed," Old Sam said, whispering it.

"Yeah," Cordrey replied. "I'll go in and make a light, then help you inside."

He left Old Sam still on the sorrel, entering the house by the kitchen door, striking a match on the door jamb. It was a three-room 'dobe. Kitchen, bedroom, parlor. No room for a guest. Cordrey lighted the kitchen lamp. He crossed to the parlor doorway, and made out Lil sitting stiffly erect on the room's most uncomfortable chair.

She had been sitting there in the dark, and that meant that she wasn't over her tantrum. She'd been waiting, intending to start the argument—a one-sided argument, to be sure—all over again. Cordrey experienced a fluttery feeling in his stomach. He hated these furies of Lil's.

"Where," Lil said coldly, "just where have you been?"

"I've got somebody with me," Cordrey said quickly, hoping to distract her. "A man I found on the desert. He's hurt. I figured we could give him supper and then I'd take him on in to San Marcos."

"If you think I'm going to cook supper for—"

"I'll get us a bite. Don't you bother, Lil."

"If you think I enjoy being an unpaid housekeeper, John Cordrey, you're badly mistaken. Work, work, work! That's all I do. While you live the life of Riley and—"

"Sh. Old Sam will hear us."

Lil jumped up, came toward Cordrey. "Let him hear!" she cried. "It's high time somebody hears what kind of a life I lead." She came into the kitchen, as Cordrey backed away. "There's little enough food in this house without my having to feed a stranger, and you know it."

She had a wild look, but normally she was a good-looking woman.

In Cordrey's eyes, Lil was beautiful. She had auburn hair, thick and wavy, and gold-flecked brown eyes. Her features were bold, almost coarse, but nicely molded. She was nearly thirty, but she was one of those rare women who held forever the bloom of youth.

She was slightly above medium height, and even the faded green gingham dress she wore failed to conceal the ripeness of her body. Lil was deep bosomed, and broad across the hips. She had this beauty of face and figure that other women might well envy, and in spite of it she was—Cordrey realized this with a sense of guilt

—somehow common and on a low level.

He saw that she was about to have a real outburst of fury, and he sought a way to forestall it. Even as he hurriedly spoke, he was ashamed of himself. For he said, "I think he's got gold on him, Lil." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I figured that maybe he'd pay us a little something if we treated him right. And then you could get those new clothes you want, so we can take in those Saturday night dances at San Marcos."

He was vastly relieved when he saw Lil's fury fade. And vastly ashamed.

CHAPTER TWO

Gold Fever

CORDREY brought Old Sam Eberts into the kitchen, eased him onto a chair, gave him a stool to rest his lame leg upon. He introduced the prospector to his wife, and Old Sam said, "Ma'am, you're sure a sight prettier than I figured you'd be." It brought a sparkle to Lil's eyes, and she was already busy at the stove when Cordrey went out to off-saddle his horse.

It had worked, all right.

Lil had forgotten her peeve, and had accepted the old man. But only because she hoped that there would be profit in it for her. Cordrey hoped that Old Sam did have a bit of dust or a few nuggets in his possession, and would be generous. Otherwise, Lil would be harder to handle than ever.

Cordrey leaned against the corral fence after putting up his horse, discouraged. He loved Lil, but he was losing his respect for her. She had few principles where money was concerned. In fact, she'd had a price tag—as it were—when Cordrey married her. He'd had a rival for her hand, but the rival, though an attractive man, had been a mere bank clerk.

Cordrey had been part owner of a prospering hardware store, on the other hand, and Lil had realized that he, though less attractive physically than her other suitor, would be able to give her a more comfortable home, finer clothes, and more of everything she wanted. Lil came from a poor family.

Cordrey had done his best for her, for three years, then his health had failed. The doctor had advised him to seek a different climate, and so he had made a deal with his partner. He no longer was paid a salary, but he did receive his share of the profits from the business.

Lil's current displeasure was due to the tardiness of the partner, Will Martin, to send Cordrey's share of the profits. Payment was made by bank draft every three months, and the latest payment was now a month and more late.

Will Martin had written that business was slow, and the profits for the year wouldn't be what he had anticipated—and that, after all, Cordrey was drawing against anticipated profits.

Lil argued that Will Martin was trying to cheat them. Cordrey maintained that his partner was an honest man.

Lil came to the doorway, her provocative figure silhouetted by the lamplight. "John," she called. Her voice was syrupy now. "Johnny, supper's about ready. Aren't you hungry?"

Cordrey said, "Coming," and, heaving a sigh, he walked wearily to the house. Lil was setting the table, and Cordrey rummaged around in a cupboard for a bottle of liniment. When he found it, he told Old Sam that he'd doctor up his leg after they'd eaten. Cordrey saw that his wife was flushed, not from the heat of the stove but from excitement.

"John, what do you think?" she said abruptly. "Sam—" she used the name familiarly—"Sam hasn't been prospecting for just ordinary gold. He's been hunting treasure. He's close to finding it, too. Sam, show John what you've found."

"Ain't much."

"What is it?" Cordrey asked, genuinely curious. "Something good?"

Old Sam showed an uneasy grin. It was evident that he was now doubting the wisdom of sharing his find with others. But he said, "Wouldn't show this to nobody but you folks," and pulled a buckskin pouch from inside his ragged shirt. He held it out to Cordrey, and there was a musical jingle of coins.

Cordrey took the pouch reluctantly, loosened its draw-string, dumped its contents onto one end of the table. There were a hundred or more coins, gold and silver, and an odd chunk of what appeared to be gold about the size of a man's fist. The coins were Mexican and Spanish, and the total value of them was hardly more than a couple hundred dollars American.

Cordrey picked up the chunk of gold. He puzzled over its shape. It had been molded or hand-tooled into a design. Looking up, he met Lil's eyes. They were feverishly bright.

"What's this, Sam?"

"Gold. Solid gold."

"It looks as though it was broken off something."

"Yeah. I figure so, too," Old Sam said. "It looks like a piece broken off a religious image. You know the kind. You can see them in the Mexican missions and cathedrals. Statues in the sanctuary niches. The Virgin Mary and the Saviour." He gestured toward the piece of gold and the coins. "I found this *tesoro* about six months ago. It was cached among some rocks, in a rawhide aparejo, and there was a gold-embroidered altar cloth with it."

Lil said eagerly, "That's not all of the treasure, John!"

Cordrey frowned. "What kind of a treasure is it, Sam?"

Old Sam said, "Loot." And Cordrey put the piece of gold down on the table, as quickly as though it had suddenly burnt. Old Sam saw that, and chuckled. "No need to be scared of it," he said. "It's loot from thirty years back. It's all but forgotten—except by a few old-timers like me. And I'm the only one who got close to it. Me, I came by the right map."

Lil gave a startled cry, turned hastily to the stove. The coffee pot was boiling over. Cordrey gathered up the treasure and thrust it back into the leather pouch. He returned the pouch to Old Sam. Lil began putting the food on the table. She still had that excited look, and she was silent and thoughtful all during the meal.

AFTERWARDS, while Lil was doing the dishes, Cordrey rubbed Old Sam's sore ankle with liniment. He didn't know if that was the sort of doctoring it required, but the prospector claimed that his leg felt better already. Cordrey told him that he'd get some spare blankets and fix a bed in the corner of the kitchen, explaining that there was but one bedroom.

"Obliged to you," the old man said. "But I'll bed down in the barn. Ain't used to sleeping in a house. John, you just help me out there. And if you don't mind, I'll take that bottle of liniment along with me."

Lil looked around from the dishpan. "Don't turn in yet, Sam," she urged. "Tell us some more about the treasure. It's exciting."

"Well," Old Sam said, taking out a pipe and a tobacco pouch, "there ain't much to tell. Back in '57, a man named Henry A. Crabbe made a deal with some politicos down in Sonora, Mexico. These politicians wanted to overthrow the Governor of Sonora. They were plotting a revolution. Crabbe joined them in the plot, and he promised to bring an army of a thousand men from California to help fight the Governor and his troops."

As Sam Eberts explained it, Crabbe recruited seventy men from among the

thousands thrown out of employment by the failure of the placer mining in California. He sailed with his men from San Francisco in January of 1857, leaving some associates behind to recruit other men for his army.

Crabbe landed at San Pedro, outfitted, took in some fresh recruits, and marched across the desert to Yuma. The band went onto Sonoita, and from there invaded Sonora.

"Hombres that try to take over the government of another country are called filibusters," Old Sam said. "This filibuster expedition was just plain ornery. Crabbe's men killed and looted, right from the start. But they got paid back—good. The politicos Crabbe had made the deal with crossed him up. The Sonorians joined together, and they made those filibusters think they were making a trip through hell. Crabbe and his men had to pay with blood for every town, village and rancho they raided.

"In April they reached a town called Cavorca, and the Sonorians under a Colonel Rodriguez besieged them. The battle lasted for days, with the Sonorians using cannon to blast the adobe walls the filibusters were hiding behind. After a week, Crabbe was out of water and provisions—and just about out of powder. He had to surrender. There were fifty-seven men with him when he gave up, and the Sonorians executed them all except a fifteen-year-old boy."

Old Sam puffed at his pipe.

AFTER a long moment of silence, he muttered, "Yes, sir. That's what happened to those filibusters. They had it coming to them, I reckon. They looted every place they came to, even churches."

Cordrey broke in, "But if they were all killed but the boy, they must have lost their loot."

Old Sam chuckled. "That's what everybody who knows about the expedition thinks—that the Sonorians got back the loot. Me, I know better. So do a couple other old-timers. But Crabbe was a tricky son. Before he reached Cavorca, he sent five of his men back toward Arizona with the loot packed on horses. Those five traveled only at night, and they rigged themselves out in Mexican clothes.

"Disguised like that, they managed to get away. Once they were safe across in Arizona, they got to thinking. They figured that Crabbe and the others would never escape, so they decided to keep the loot. They steered clear of Sonoita, where there were Americans, and they trailed northeast."

Old Sam paused, finding that his pipe had gone out.

"What happened then?" Lil asked tensely.

"Those five reached the Coffin Hills," Old Sam said, smiling at her. "And ran smack into a band of Apaches. It was a running fight for a couple of days, and finally they were forced to cache their loot. Even then they didn't give the 'Paches the slip. Before it was over four of them were dead, and only one got away. He was more dead than alive. A man named Caleb Brant. He got back to California finally. Crippled for life, he was—and a little loco."

Old Sam yawned, said that he'd turn in.

Lil said hastily, "Did Caleb Brant tell you about the treasure?"

"He did that, ma'am," Old Sam replied. "About five years ago, just before he died up on the Feather River in California. I'd been grubstaking him. He figured he owed me something, so he told me about the treasure and he gave me a map. Two years ago I came here to the Territory and started hunting the treasure. The aparejo I found was one Brant and the other four had lost just before they cached the loot, so I know I'm pretty close to striking it rich. Even though the map is none too accurate."

Lil's voice, almost purred, saying "John, Sam's tired. Why don't you help him to the barn? I'll get a pair of blankets for him."

She even smiled at Cordrey.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder—My Hellcat!

SHE LAY warm and soft in Cordrey's arms, giving off the pleasant scent of perfumed soap. Her hair was light and fluffy against his face. Her voice was a whisper in the darkness, but it knifed through Cordrey as though it were a scream. She lay still enough beside him in their bed, but he could feel the wild excitement in her.

"It would be easy, Johnny," Lil whispered. "And we'd be fools to let the chance slip through our fingers. We'd be rich, you and I, and when you're rich you can have fun. Just think of it, darling—being rich after all these years of living off a couple thousand dollars from a silly hardware store!"

"Lil, you don't know what you're saying."

"I do," she said flatly. "He's helpless. He can't defend himself. Nobody would ever know. Nobody even knows he's here!"

"But murder, Lil?"

"It doesn't have to be that."

"He won't give up that map," Cordrey muttered. "Not to anybody."

"All that's necessary is to get hold of it for a little while," Lil whispered. "We could make a copy." Her arms tightened about him. "John, if you love me—"

He pulled away, sat up, held his head in his hands.

Lil was silent for a time, watching him in the darkness. Finally she said, not whispering now, "You could lose me, John. Did you ever think of that? Didn't you ever think I might not go on living in such a godforsaken place as this forever?"

"Give me a little time, Lil. To think it out."

"You don't have much time. He won't stay here long."

"I know, I know."

"All we need is the map—for a few minutes."

Cordrey remained silent, knowing that Old Sam wouldn't let the map out of his possession. The prospector was old and his strength was gone, but he was shrewd and he possessed the suspicious nature of his kind. The map could be taken from him only by force. Lil knew that. She knew it and still expected him to get it from the old man. Cordrey felt a sense of shock. He was just beginning to know his wife.

Lil said, "John, I want that treasure. If you want me, if you want to keep me, you'll find a way to get it."

She turned her back to him. Shortly, by the slow rhythm of her breathing, he knew that she slept. Cordrey sat there, his arms folded on his bent knees, his head resting on his arms. He sat there like that until the gray of dawn crept into the bedroom.

OLD SAM was rubbing his leg with liniment. It appeared to be no worse, and he claimed that it was some better. "A couple days rest," he told Cordrey, "and I'll be getting around again." He stared at the thing Cordrey had brought with him. "What's that?"

It was a silver-knobbed walking stick.

Cordrey said, "I used to need this to get around before I came out here, I was so sick and weak. I thought you could use it." He took a pair of socks from his pocket. "You can wear these, Sam. Better than keeping that foot bare. Breakfast is about ready."

Old Sam was grateful, showed it with a grin.

He pulled one of the socks on the foot

of the sore leg, then rose and supported himself with the cane. He chuckled, said, "Makes me feel like a dude." He slanted Cordrey a look. "You and the missus must have been fancy folks, back East."

"We led a comfortable life, Sam."

"Mrs. Cordrey doesn't like it out here, eh?"

"She hates it. I like it," Cordrey said. "I'd like to stay here the rest of my life. I'd stock the range and—" he smiled sheepishly—" and be a rancher. Let's go have breakfast."

Old Sam made it across to the kitchen with the aid of the cane.

Lil gave him a welcoming smile, then, as they sat at the table, she apologized for the scanty fare. "We'll have to drive into town for provisions, John," she added. "The cupboard is just about bare. Maybe the check from Will Martin is at the post office by now. If it is, we'll stock up."

Cordrey said gloomily, "Lil, you know that check won't be there."

Old Sam was attentive, studying them.

He brought out his buckskin pouch, tossed it onto the table, and said, "Take out fifty of those Mex silver dollars. It's only fitting that a man pays board. Maybe you'll fetch me a couple plugs of chewing tobacco, eh?"

Lil cried, "Oh, Sam, I could hug you!"

She grabbed up the pouch.

CORDREY hitched up the team to the buckboard, then had a long wait for Lil. When she appeared, she was wearing her best dress. It was dark green, and it went well with her auburn hair. It was the last dress she had bought before they left Philadelphia. Lil stopped to tell Old Sam, sitting on a bench by the kitchen door, where to find some food in case he got hungry.

"It'll be late when we get back," she said cheerfully, and it was difficult for Cordrey to believe that she had wanted to plot the old-timer's death. "It's Saturday, and there'll be a dance tonight. Maybe Johnny and I will stay for it."

She came to the buckboard, and Cordrey helped her to the seat. He swung up, untied the reins from the whipstock, nodded to Old Sam.

There was a trace of a road north from the ranch buildings, and it joined a well-worn road several miles farther on. Cordrey drove in silence, full of gloomy thoughts, but Lil, in a gay mood, hummed softly some catchy tune. It was a long time since Cordrey had seen her happy, but, aware of what was in her mind, he couldn't respond to her gaiety. He drove the team along in silence.

They reached San Marcos shortly after noon, and its short main street was already lined with saddle horses and all manner of rigs. Ranch folks always came to town on Saturday, and it was almost a holiday. Cordrey found a place for his buckboard and team, but Lil shook her head.

"Put the horses up at the livery stable," she said. "I want to stay for the dance. And you can let me down at Bess Lawton's house. I'm going to have her make me a dress. I'll be some time, selecting the material and a pattern. You go buy what provisions we need."

"Lil, listen—"

"Yes?"

"Nothing," Cordrey said. He couldn't deny her the dress. "I'll let you off at Mrs. Lawton's."

He knew that Lil was planning to pay for the dress with a part of Old Sam's filibuster treasure. The knowledge made him really feel like what his wife thought him—only half a man.

Cordrey went onto Doan's general store after leaving his wife at the dressmaker's house. The post office was located in the store, to the right of the entrance, and Ed Doan's daughter, Sharon, was behind the grilled window.

The girl smiled, said, "Yes, there is a letter for you, Mr. Cordrey."

Cordrey was buoyed up.

The letter from Will Martin contained a check for seventy dollars. The amount wasn't near what Cordrey had hoped for, but it was a help. He could return Old Sam's Mexican money. Cordrey endorsed the check, asked Ed Doan to cash it, then bought twenty dollars worth of provisions.

He loaded his purchases onto the buckboard, covered them with the tarpaulin, lashed it down, then drove to Kyle's livery stable and put up the team.

He still saw nothing of Lil, so he went to Baldy Sims' barber shop for a haircut and shave, and then had dinner at the Welcome Cafe. When he came from the grubby little restaurant, Cordrey walked downstreet toward Mrs. Lawton's house. He saw Lil in front of the dressmaker's place, talking to a man on a horse.

Bart Riordan was a Rocker W hand. He was a wide-shouldered man with a broad and coarsely handsome face. He had curly brown hair, china blue eyes, and an easy grin. Riordan was a tophand with cattle and a expert bronc-buster, Cordrey had heard. He was also a ladies' man, and a brute in a fight.

Cordrey remembered the attention Riordan had shown Lil at the one dance they had attended here in San Marcos. He remembered the way Lil had slyly flirted with Riordan.

Lil's face was flushed now, and her eyes were aglow.

Riordan leaned forward on his big dun horse, arms folded on the pommel, his hat shoved back off his brow. He was grinning broadly, and no doubt talking banteringly. He would be flattering Lil, of course, and Lil would be liking that.

Cordrey saw an intimacy that was perhaps something he merely read into an innocent encounter, but it infuriated him.

He'd stopped in his tracks. Now he uttered an agonized sound, and started toward them again. His fists were clenched. Abruptly his jealous rage burst, and he was just sickly jealous. He knew that it was his fault that Lil needed the attention of a man, a sound man. She was bored with him, a weakling. Cordrey halted again, turned on his heel.

He turned into a saloon, and for the first time in more than a year he had a drink of whiskey.

He was a little drunk that night when he took Lil to the dance at the town hall, and he was a lot drunker before it was time to start for home. Seeing Lil dancing with Bart Riordan sent him from the dance on frequent visits to the nearest saloon during the evening. Why, he didn't know. It didn't numb his mind enough to free him of his agony of thoughts. Too, he had a bad few minutes at the livery stable. He was so sick on the rotgut whiskey that he was in physical agony too.

Afterward, driving home with Lil, he sobered enough to wonder why he had gone off like that. Lil was peeved.

"What ails you, anyway?" she demanded. "Did you have to spoil my evening?"

"Your evening with Bart Riordan, you mean?"

"So you're jealous. Well, I didn't think you had it in you."

"Giving folks something to gossip about."

"I? That's ridiculous. Just because I danced with a man a few times because my husband got drunk—" She broke off abruptly, turned to stare at him. "It's more than Bart Riordan that's bothering you," she accused him. "You're not just jealous. You're scared. You've lost your nerve already. You're—not—going—through—with—it!"

CORDREY didn't look at her. He didn't need to, for he could feel her contempt. He whipped up the horses, in

a sudden hurry—but without any hope of escape. He was beginning to feel sick again. He wished that Lil would quit talking about it.

She wouldn't, of course. She would keep nagging at him. It would be worse than ever before, because she now knew what she wanted. That treasure of Old Sam's. Cordrey shuddered, fought down a retching spell.

Lil surprised him.

She was silent a long while, and he must have driven several miles before she said, "Lord, if you were only half the man Bart Riordan is! I told him about that old fool and his treasure, and Bart said that—"

Cordrey looked at her now, stared. "You didn't!"

"Why not?"

"It's not your secret to tell."

"Oh, don't be a fool," Lil retorted. "Bart wouldn't tell anybody else what he and I talk about." The thought gave her some sort of pleasure, for she smiled. "After all," she added, "Bart Riordan thinks that I—"

"Lil, shut up!"

"Jealous! You haven't any nerve, but still you can be jealous!"

"Shut up, I say!"

Lil laughed, long and loud.

Reaching the ranch, Cordrey let his wife get from the buckboard at the house and drove on to the corral. He unhitched the horses, turned them into the pen, then went into the house. Lil had lighted no lamp. She'd gone directly to the bedroom, and she'd closed the door.

There was no lock on the door, but it didn't swing open to Cordrey's touch. She'd pushed the bureau over so that it held the door. Cordrey didn't try to force it. He thought, The hell with it, and he slept that night on the parlor sofa.

He was up at dawn. He carried the provisions in from the buckboard, put them away, then made some coffee. He noticed that Lil had made a few purchases, but he didn't open her packages. After drinking some coffee, he went out and saddled his sorrel.

He rode far out into the desert again that day, almost to the rocky uplifts of the Coffin Hills. It did him no good. A man couldn't ride away from his troubles.

When he returned late in the afternoon, Cordrey saw Old Sam hobbling about the ranchyard with the aid of the cane. The old-timer's ankle was improved. He had managed to get his boot on, so apparently some of swelling had gone down. Old Sam had a a brand new shirt, and his old one hung on the wash line.

"Feeling better and slicked up, eh, Sam?" Cordrey said, forcing a smile he didn't feel at all.

"Feel like a new man. Your missus fetched me this shirt from town, without me asking her to. Washed my old one, too, though I argued against it. Partner, you folks are too blamed good to Old Sam."

Cordrey smiled again, with an effort.

He off-saddled his horse, watered it, turned it into the corral.

WHEN he entered the house, Lil wasn't in the kitchen or in the parlor. She was in the bedroom, seated at the little table they used as a desk, and she was so intent upon whatever she was writing that she was unaware of Cordrey until he stood beside her.

Then she gave a violent start and tried to cover with her hands the papers on the table. There was a frightened, guilty look on her face.

Cordrey caught hold her, by the arms, and lifted her from her chair. Lil cried, "Let go of me!" He did. He shoved her down onto the bed. He looked at the papers there on the table, and the one was yellow and soiled and ragged. It was a crudely drawn map.

Old Sam's map.

The other paper was the copy of the map Lil had made.

He swung toward her. She was rubbing her arms, and she said, with surprise rather than with anger, "You hurt me." She looked frightened still, but differently—frightened of him, of what he might do.

"So that's why you bought him a new shirt," Cordrey said flatly. "So you could get his old one into your hands. And not to wash it. You knew he kept that map in his shirt pocket, and you hoped that he'd forget to take it out when he changed shirts."

"John, I—"

"I'm not listening. Don't waste your breath."

He turned to the table, picked up the map and the copy.

He expected Lil to jump off the bed and try to wrest them from him, but she didn't move. She merely watched him warily. He went to the kitchen, shoved the copy into the fire, then went out and gave Old Sam the map. He merely explained that Lil had found it in his old shirt before she put it in the wash tub, and the old man didn't seem suspicious at all.

Cordrey kept away from the house until Lil called him and Old Sam to supper. She kept watching him all the while they ate, but her face was blank and he couldn't tell what lay behind her watchful eyes.

After supper, Old Sam filled and lighted his pipe. The smell of the tobacco smoke made Cordrey feel a sudden hunger despite his full stomach. He went into the parlor and rummaged around until he found his own, long neglected briar. The whiskey he'd consumed last night hadn't seemed to harm him, so a smoke shouldn't bother him. He returned to the kitchen.

"How about some of your tobacco, Sam?"

"Sure," Old Sam said, handing over his pouch.

Lil looked around from doing the dishes, surprised.

Cordrey filled and lighted his pipe, and the taste was good. He inhaled deeply, then strolled outside. He had been keyed up, but smoking helped him to relax. It did more for him than that whiskey last night. Or maybe it wasn't that. He'd gotten a grip on himself earlier, he suddenly realized, when he took the map and the copy of it from Lil.

She came out of the house to empty the dishpan.

Cordrey swung over to her. "Lil, don't bother to barricade that door tonight," he told her. "It won't keep me out. I'm not interested any more."

He expected an outburst, but Lil kept her voice down.

She said thickly, "Have your way. It won't be for long."

She went back inside, leaving Cordrey more jolted than if she had screamed at him. His moment of self-control was over, and he thought with alarm, She's made up her mind. She's decided to leave me.

He knocked the tobacco from his pipe, went inside. Lil was tidying up, her movements mechanical, a stony look on her face.

Old Sam yawned, and said, "Guess it's time for an old mossyhorn to hit the hay." He rose, took up the cane, hobbled to the door. He paused there, and said, "Folks, I've been doing a lot of thinking and I've made up my mind to something. Nobody's ever treated me like this, and I feel mighty grateful. I'm making you, John, my partner and I'd sure like you to help me hunt that treasure of mine."

He chuckled upon seeing the Cordreys' startled faces.

Cordrey looked at his wife. There was a triumphant look glowing in her bright eyes

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell in Coffin Hills!

THEY TALKED it over the next day, Cordrey agreeing to accompany Sam Eberts into the Coffin Hills with a reluctance he himself didn't wholly understand. He guessed that he was squeamish, that he really wanted no part of treasure that was blood-stained loot. But Cordrey said nothing of that.

He told Old Sam, "We'll use one of the horses for a pack animal, and ride the other two."

It was then that Lil announced, "You'll have to get another horse to pack along what's needed. Because I'm going along."

Cordrey didn't argue against it.

He saw that her mind was made up, anyway. And he realized too that it was better to keep her with him. Left alone, she might decide to leave him. The lack of a horse wouldn't stop her, if she decided to go. There was a Mexican family living beyond the ridge two miles to the east, and Lil could walk there and ask the peon to take her to San Marcos in his wagon.

Cordrey recalled that Bart Riordan had ridden by the place twice during the past few months—and might show up again. He didn't want Lil here alone if that happened.

So he told Lil, "All right. You'll go along."

He rode to town and hired a horse at Kyle's livery stable, and he was just about to start back home when Bart Riordan came loping into town with two other Rocker W hands. Seeing Cordrey, Riordan swung over. The two other riders reined up in the middle of the street.

Riordan was grinning and there was a mocking look in his eyes. He said, "Hiya, tenderfoot. What are you doing with a spare horse?"

"My business."

"You must be doing a lot of riding—or planning to."

"I told you, it's my business. Nobody else's."

Riordan chuckled. "Cocky, ain't you?" he said, and contempt was strong in his loud voice. "Tell me, dude, how's that good-looking wife of yours? Or ain't that any of my business, either?"

When he was younger, before his health went bad, Cordrey had done some boxing. He'd been a member of a sporting club where one of the attendants was a former prizefighter. Cordrey had taken lessons from the man for more than a year, just for the sport of it. But he'd never fought in anger in his life. He knew suddenly that he was going to fight this burly, swaggering, loud-mouthed Bart Riordan.

He stepped away from his horses. He said flatly, "Riordan, I figure that a man who's interested in another man's wife is ten times worse than one who's interested in somebody else's horses or cattle."

He saw the look of startled surprise on Riordan's broad face.

The two other Rocker W riders had heard, and they showed surprise and amusement. One said, "He sure called you, Bart." And the other added, chuckling, "He sure did."

In the barn door, Matt Kyle said with an edge to his voice, "Time somebody called you on that, Riordan." A few men farther along the street were looking that way, aware that something was happening.

RIORDAN'S grin was gone. He looked as if he wished he were away from there. Cordrey had a sudden suspicion that big Bart Riordan wasn't the man he appeared to be—or pretended to be. But he had been called in front of witnesses, and he couldn't take that.

Riordan swore. "Nobody can say I try to steal any man's stock—or woman." He came down from his dun horse, mov-

ing at Cordrey. There was a naked look of self-doubt in his eyes that gave Cordrey hope. But the man was game enough.

He suddenly rushed, striking out clumsy but powerful blows. A fist smashed in Cordrey's face, slammed him back against the wall of the barn. He'd never been so badly hurt. His brain exploded with pain. He hung there dazed. And now Riordan was sure of himself—and of his man. Riordan laughed, and closed in for a finishing blow.

Cordrey saw it coming, and just in time he recalled the training he'd obtained from that ex-prizefighter. He ducked low as Riordan launched his blow. Everything Riordan had was behind it, all his strength and weight, all his lack of skill, and Riordan couldn't pull the punch when Cordrey ducked beneath it. The man's fist struck the plank wall, with terrific force.

He howled and reeled away, hugging his hurt hand to his belly, his face twisted with agony. Cordrey exalted in it, and Matt Kyle urged, "Get him, friend! Get him!"

Cordrey got him.

He moved in lightly, on his toes, jabbing his fists to Riordan's face. He hadn't Riordan's strength, but he had skill. He battered the man about the face and head, Riordan weaving and staggering away from him all the while—and Cordrey crowding him.

When Riordan shielded his face with his arms, Cordrey shifted the attack to the man's body. And Riordan had to drop his guard again, for Cordrey to lash out at his face once more.

The two Rocker W hands came down off their horses, but the liveryman shouted a warning, "Keep out of it, dammit!" Men were coming along the street at a run, one yelling excitedly, "Fight! Fight!"

Riordan tried to drive a knee to Cordrey's groin, and missed. He roared like an infuriated bull and slammed bodily against Cordrey. Cordrey went down, but rolled away before Riordan could use his boots. He came up lightly, dodging a left that Riordan threw at him.

He battered the cowhand's face again, and Riordan's left eye was now swollen, his nose flattened and bleeding, his lips cut and torn. Cordrey was tiring, he was growing winded, his legs were weakening. But he was grinning. He wasn't just hitting Bart Riordan. He was also punishing a woman who thought him less than a man.

Finally Riordan fell to his knees, making sobbing sounds, dripping blood in the dust. And he stayed there. Cordrey laughed, and mocked, "Come on, Riordan! Come on and fight! How are you going to look to the ladies when they hear about this?"

Riordan wouldn't get up.

He knelt there, bowed over, sobbing, retching.

Cordrey laughed again. He picked up his hat, dusted it. Matt Kyle came and put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "That I've wanted to see for a long time. Me and a lot of other hombres," he said. "But you watch yourself from now on. He won't forget it. He'll try to crowd you into a corner where you won't have a chance."

Cordrey nodded.

He mounted, caught up the spare horse's halter rope, and turned away. Quite a crowd had gathered by now, and it silently watched him ride out of town.

When Cordrey got home, Lil came to the kitchen door to see if he had brought a horse. She saw the ugly bruise on his left cheek that Bart Riordan's first blow had left, and she said, "What happened to you?" There wasn't much concern behind the question.

Cordrey said, "Ask Bart Riordan when you see him again."

He grinned at her, and took the horses to the corral.

AT SUNDOWN two days later they came to Old Sam's camp deep in the Coffin Hills. It was torturous country, narrow gorges with sheer cliff walls, barren, a rocky maze in which only an experienced prospector like Sam Eberts could have found his way. But his camp was located in a small canyon with a small stream, some grass and much mesquite, with scrub piñons sprouting from the steep slopes.

The camp was merely an old tent and a stone fireplace, but to Old Sam it was home and he seemed happy to get back to it. Lil looked about frowningly, but made no comment. She was silent nowadays, subdued, and only when Cordrey and Old Sam talked about the treasure did her face show interest.

Her manner toward Cordrey puzzled him. She was behaving like an old-fashioned wife who knew her place, obedient and submissive. Cordrey had the feeling that she was merely tolerating him. It was worse than her hating him, her having no feeling for him at all.

Cordrey off-saddled the horses and carried the provisions into the tent while Old Sam gathered brush for a fire. Lil busied herself with fixing the food for the fire. It was dark by the time they had finished supper, and then Old Sam, lighting his pipe, said,

"I found that arapejo about two miles from here. We'll start our search from that spot, but this'll be our base. We'll start out first thing in the morning."

"What will we be looking for, Sam?" Cordrey asked.

"A cliff wall with a crevice at the base."

"And landmarks?"

"Three peaks each about a mile from the other two," the prospector said. "I located the peaks, but I never could find the cliff. It's supposed to be somewhere inside the triangle formed by the peaks."

He took the map from his shirt pocket, and they studied it for a long time. It was a crude drawing, the ink blurred and faded. Not much was to be learned from it, other than what Old Sam had already told Cordrey. The three peaks were west of their camp, and an *X* marked the location of the cache. There was a lot of wild, broken country within the triangle formed by the peaks.

Cordrey was last to turn in that night, and then, lying in his blankets, he could not sleep. He still wasn't sure that he wanted to share in that blood-stained filibuster loot. He lay listening to Old Sam's loud snoring and to Lil's restless twisting and turning in her sleep. And then, as he grew drowsy, he thought he heard the *clop clop* of hoofs in the distance.

He rose from his blankets, pulled the rifle from the scabbard on his saddle—unreasonably alarmed. Old Sam was a light sleeper despite his heavy snoring, and he whispered, "What's bothering you, partner?"

"Thought I heard a rider, Sam."

"Damn! Let me do some listening."

The old man had gotten from his blankets, but now he dropped flat and held his ear to the ground. Cordrey realized that he was imitating an old Indian trick. Distant sound could be heard more clearly close to the ground.

Suddenly Old Sam rose and went into his tent. He re-appeared with an old six-shooter, and complaining because he had lost his rifle that day Cordrey had found him on the desert. He went to the now-dying fire and scattered it with his boot, stamping out the embers.

"Somebody out at the head of the canyon," he muttered. "I figure he was riding the other way. He must have drifted in this way, then turned back when he saw our fire. Me, I don't like it. I spent two years here in these rock hills without seeing anybody but a Mexican on the dodge from the law. Now, our first night, somebody's prowling around our camp."

"Maybe it's somebody like that Mexi-

can, on the dodge and not wanting to be seen."

"Maybe."

"We'll keep our eyes open from now on."

"John, you didn't mention that treasure to anybody in San Marcos?"

"No, Sam," Cordrey said slowly. "I didn't mention it to anybody."

He glanced at Lil, who had told Bart Riordan about the treasure. Lil was still asleep.

OLD SAM came riding in through the canyon when Cordrey woke at sunup. He dismounted, said frowningly, "I cut that night rider's sign, and followed his tracks for a couple miles back through the hills. He came in our our trail, partner, and went back along it—heading back toward the desert. I'd sure like to know what he's up to."

"Somebody picked up our trail and was curious, maybe."

"Maybe," Old Sam muttered, still uneasy.

Lil woke and went to the creek to wash up, taking her hairbrush along. Cordrey watched her disappear through the brush, then went to meet her after he got the breakfast fire started. She was sitting on a slab of rock by the stream, brushing her hair. It had coppery tints in the morning sun. She gazed at him with wary eyes. He caught hold of her arm.

"You made a deal with Riordan," he said savagely.

She looked startled. "That's not so," she said. "Let go of me!"

"You told him about the treasure. You admitted that."

"I didn't admit making a deal with him."

"Somebody was spying on us last night," Cordrey said, learning nothing from her manner. "It couldn't have been anybody but Riordan. You told him about the treasure. He knew I came to town for another horse. He figured that we were going after the treasure. So he waited for us to leave the ranch, then he trailed us. Why? He could have only one reason. Because you made a deal with him."

"And you're scared," Lil mocked him. "You're scared to death!"

"Lil, I'm warning you."

"That you'll do what?"

He started at her—loving her, hating her. She was silently laughing at him. He let loose of her arm, turned away. He pushed through the brush, then, reaching the camp, he picked up her blankets. He flung them aside, grabbed up the coat that matched her riding skirt. It was heavier than it should have been, because of something in the right hand pocket.

A gun. A .32 caliber revolver.

His revolver, which he hadn't thought to bring along.

Cordrey swore under his breath. For some reason he didn't understand, he left the revolver where it was.

CHAPTER FIVE

The High Graders

DURING the first three days they had no luck at all, returning dog-tired to the camp each night. Cordrey wasn't disappointed, since he didn't care whether or not they located the cache, but Lil was obviously discouraged. Old Sam Eberts, with far less time to enjoy sudden riches, remained patient and optimistic—and kept saying, "Me, I've got a hunch that we're getting close to it."

The fourth day was also spent in the torturous rock country between the three peaks, and in mid-afternoon Cordrey reined in his horse and wiped sweat and dust from his face. "Sam, we're going at this wrong," he said tiredly. "We're just hoping to stumble on that cache."

"Yeah? What's in your mind, part-

ner? You got a better way to do it?"

"How did Caleb Brant describe that cliff with the crevice?"

"Well, he said it faced south," Old Sam said, probing into his memory. "He said—hold on there a minute! I've been wrong. Caleb didn't call it a cliff. I recollect now. Durn an old man's memory!"

"Sam!" Lil exclaimed. "What is it? Try to remember!"

"Caleb said that it was a big rock."

"Go on, Sam!" Lil cried. "Oh, remember, please!"

"Caleb and the others had to climb to it," Old Sam muttered, thinking aloud. "It was a steep sandy slope—not a cliff. The rock with the crevice was on top of it. Caleb said the rock was shaped like—like a blacksmith's anvil!"

"Now we'll certainly find it!" Lil said excitedly.

Cordrey wasn't so sure. He now distrusted Old Sam's memory. He had a suspicion that the prospector was relying more upon his imagination than upon his memory.

Cordrey said, "We'll search for that rock tomorrow. It's getting late, and we're five miles or more from camp. Let's call it quits for today."

"No," Lil cried. "We're too close now."

"Yeah," said Old Sam. "We'll find it before sundown, sure!"

Cordrey shrugged, not sharing their enthusiasm. "All right," he said, dead sure that they wouldn't find any such rock as the old man described. An hour's search proved him wrong.

There was a steep boulder-strewn slope perhaps three hundred feet high, and at the top of it was a formation of red rock about fifty feet high that, seen from the south, did resemble an anvil. The three riders stared up at the eroded rock in awed silence, then Lil uttered a squeal of sheer delight.

She swung down from her horse, started climbing the slop. She fell, picked herself up, not bothering to brush the dust from her skirt and jacket. Her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin strap, and her hair was wildly tousled. She was laughing hysterically.

Old Sam sighed wearily, muttered something about the two years he had spent searching, then dismounted and started after Lil.

Cordrey followed, slowly at first, and then, caught up by an excitement of his own, he too began to hurry. On top the slope he picked his way through a jumble of boulders, and found Lil and Old Sam staring at a pile of small rocks built up like a cairn midway along the base of the great anvil-shaped formation.

Cordrey heard Old Sam mutter, "That's it. Just like Caleb said. And it's never been touched, not in thirty years!"

Cordrey heard something else, a drumming of hoofs.

He swung around and saw three riders approaching at a hard lope. Even at a distance, he identified one of them as Bart Riordan.

CORDREY yelled, "Sam!" The old man swung around, swore bitterly, jerked his old six-shooter from the waistband of his pants. His beard seemed to brittle. His old eyes lost their faded look, glinted with anger.

"Claim-jumpers!" he growled. And swore again. "Partner, we've got no choice but to fight. They won't just rob us of the treasure. They'll kill us. Run down to the horses and get your rifle. Me, I'll follow—and cover you."

Cordrey started out through the rocks at a run. Behind him, Old Sam told Lil to stay where she was.

Cordrey started down the slope at too fast a pace. Its steepness threw him off balance, and he fell headlong. He somersaulted, then rolled sideways. When he came to a stop, he was hurt and badly shaken up. He rose dazedly, and Old Sam

yelled at him to hurry and run for it.

He started downward again, and the pounding of hoofs was now loud in his ears. Old Sam's six-shooter roared, shattering the heavy stillness of the hills with a myriad of echoes. Old Sam fired again and again, then a rifle cracked. Old Sam cried out, and then his six-shooter was silent.

Cordrey was still short of the base of the slope when the riders came up, and swung between him and his horses. They reined in facing him, their mounts lathered and blowing. Bart Riordan's broad face still showed the marks of the beating Cordrey had given him. And it now wore a smirk.

"Didn't figure on this, did you, dude?" Riordan sneered.

He had his sixgun in his hand, aimed at Cordrey's stomach.

The two men with him were strangers to Cordrey. They were hard-visaged men, and one had a rifle across his saddle. It had been that one who shot down Sam Eberts. He was a wizened little man, his face wedge-shaped.

The other was big, thick through the body, swarthy. There was an ugly scar along his left cheek. The lower part of his face was black with a week's growth of bristle. He had a sixgun in his right hand. He grinned at Cordrey. His grin was an ugly grimace.

"Led us right to that treasure, hombre," he said. "Just like Bart said you would. We been watching you from the ridge back yonder the last four days, taking it easy and letting you do the work for us."

The wizened little tough muttered, "Holly, you talk too much." He looked at Riordan. "All right. You wanted to take him alive, so you could pay him back for the beating he gave you. You've got him now. Finish him off, and we'll go up and get that loot."

"I'm taking my time," Riordan said. "I always like to enjoy my fun. Jess, you go up and make sure the old man's dead."

"What about the girl?"

"Keep your hands off her!"

"She's up there, guarding the cache."

"Keep your hands off her," Riordan growled. "I'll take care of her. She goes with my share of the loot. Get going, Jess."

The little tough dismounted, mumbling to himself. He began climbing the slope. The burly Holly turned his horse away so that he could keep an eye on Jess. Riordan never took his murky gaze off Cordrey.

Riordan said, "You lose the treasure and your woman, dude. All you get out of it is a beating, and then a bullet in the guts. Maybe you'd like to know how I found out about that treasure."

"I know," Cordrey said. "Quit talking. Get it over with."

"Your wife told me," Riordan taunted. "She told me while I was dancing with her Saturday night in town. She told me that you didn't have guts enough to go after it. Found the guts, didn't you? But you left a trail a blind man could have followed, and now you're at the end of it."

Holly swore, yelled, "That damn' Jess is going up to the cache!"

Riordan took his gaze off Cordrey then, to see what Jess was up to, and the distrust that had been in Holly's voice was now mirrored on the cowhand's bruised face. "Get him!" Riordan growled. "Stop the sneaky son! If he gets hands on that loot, he'll cheat us sure."

Holly swung his horse over to the base of the slope, dropped off, started climbing. Above, having reached the crest, Jess ducked in among the boulders. Holly shouted at him, cursed him, and fired a wild shot. Riordan was still gazing upwards, and it was then that Cordrey saw his one chance—and took it.

He leapt at Riordan, caught him around the middle. He dragged Riordan from the saddle, then let loose of him. Riordan yelped and tumbled to the ground in a

loose heap, and Cordrey, wild with desperation, kicked him in the face. Riordan shrieked, and Cordrey fell upon him.

He jerked the six gun from Riordan's limp hand, swung it high, clubbed down. Riordan's hat partly cushioned the blow, but still it was heavy enough to knock the man out.

A shot crashed, a slug shrieked.

Cordrey rolled away from Riordan and saw that Holly had turned, midway up the slope, and was shooting down at him. He answered Holly's second shot, but missed. He tried again, with no better luck. Holly was descending now, retracing his steps, shortening the range.

Cordrey fired again, then flung the six-gun down. He was no good with a .45 revolver. He'd never used one before, and it was too heavy and unwieldy for him. He leapt to his sorrel horse and jerked the Winchester from its saddle boot. The sorrel, spooked, shied away from him. Cordrey levered a cartridge into the firing chamber, jerked the .30-30 to his shoulder.

He caught Holly in the chest with his first shot as the hardcase stumbled in his headlong descent of the steep slope.

Up above, Lil screamed.

Cordrey ran past Holly's lifeless body that now came to rest against a boulder. He climbed in frantic haste, stumbling at times, falling once. He saw Old Sam stir, heard him gasp, "Watch it, partner! They'll kill you!"

He scrambled on, and now saw Jess tearing at the rocks piled against the fissure in the anvil rock. The wizened hardcase was wrestling the small boulders away like a crazy man, wild to get at the treasure. Lil lay on the ground, pushed or knocked down by the man.

Cordrey halted, gasping for breath, swung his rifle up.

He ricocheted a slug off the rock, close to Jess. The hardcase whirled, a look of surprise on his ugly face. It was evident that the man had been so intent upon getting to the treasure that the shooting—if he'd heard it at all—had meant nothing at all. He grabbed for his gun now, however, but too late. He no more than got it clear of its holster when Cordrey's slug tore into him.

THE SUDDEN quiet seemed to throb. Then Lil said, whispered, "John! Oh John!" She rose and came toward Cordrey. He stared at her almost blankly, as though he'd never seen her before, then he turned on his heel. He went to where Old Sam lay, midway down the slope. The old man was shot through the left shoulder, but he was conscious and he managed a grin.

"You did for them, eh, partner?"

Cordrey nodded jerkily. "How bad is it, Sam?"

"Bad. But I've been hurt worse," Old Sam said thickly. "Wad your neckscarf inside my shirt and against the hole, son. To stop the bleeding. Then help me climb back up there. There's still light enough left for us to see our treasure."

Cordrey folded his neckscarf and fixed it over the wound in Old Sam's shoulder. But he protested against taking the prospector up to the cache, giving in only when he saw how much it meant to the old man. Cordrey had to leave his rifle behind, for Old Sam leaned heavily against him.

It took them a long time to reach the top of the slope and to travel to the base of the anvil rock. There Cordrey eased the old man to the ground in a sitting position, his back to a boulder. Lil went and knelt by Old Sam, her face pale and a look of shock in her eyes.

As dusk thickened, Cordrey removed the remaining rocks from the crevice. He found the fissure to be about four feet wide and tapering away to solid stone about six feet from the base. It was hardly more than three feet deep.

It was empty, except for a piece of old rawhide.

Cordrey lifted the rawhide out. It was about three feet long and a foot wide, and there was a word burnt into it in big letters. The word was:

Venganza.

Old Sam could see that the crevice was empty.

He said huskily, "Let's see that, partner." He stared at the rawhide when Cordrey held it close. "So they got the loot back," he muttered. "Those Sonorians railed Caleb Brant and his *compañeros.* Maybe the Apaches who killed Brant's partners brought them here. They took the treasure back to Sonora, folks. They cheated us out of it. *Venganza.* That's Mexican for vengeance."

Cordrey said, "Sam, I don't care about it. But I'm sorry for you."

Old Sam grinned. "Shucks, it's not the first time I've been disappointed. Don't worry about me. It was my last prospecting trip, John. I'm retiring. I'm going to settle down, some place peaceful." He looked up hopefully. "We still partners, John? Me, I'd like it so. We could stock your ranch. I've got a couple thousand dollars in a Frisco bank."

Cordrey nodded. "I've got a share in a Philadelphia hardware store I could sell for a couple thousand. Yes, Sam we're still partners."

He looked at Lil, then.

THE disappointment he expected to see on her face wasn't there. Lil looked shaken to the core. She faced him.

She said thickly, "You're wrong, John. I made no deal with Bart Riordan. I want you to believe that. I told him about the treasure, but there was no deal. I was silly enough to think I was sick of the life I was leading. But I know better now. John, believe me. I'm begging you to believe me."

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"Lil, I can't believe you. I just can't."

"I've changed, John."

"A person never really changes, Lil."

"You did."

He stared at her, puzzled. "I did?"

Lil nodded jerkily. "You'll never be a weakling again, after what you did here," she said huskily. "And I swear it, I'll never be a silly fool again. I'll be a good wife, John. A rancher's wife, if that's what will make you want me again. I don't care we missed the treasure."

Cordrey shook his head.

Lil was—Lil. She couldn't change.

A boot scuffed rock. There was a metallic click, the hammer of a gun being cocked. Cordrey whirled and saw Bart Riordan coming at him through the gathering shadows. Riordian had lost his hat. His face was bloody. His eyes were wide, staring, crazy.

Riordian swung the gun up. "You should have killed me when you had the chance, dude," he said. "Now it's too late!"

Cordrey lifted empty hands.

A gun cracked.

Riordan staggered, a look of shock on his battered face.

Cordrey whirled, saw the revolver—his own .32—in Lil's hand. He grabbed it from her, faced Riordan again. Riordan had fallen to his knees, but he was again leveling his sixgun. Cordrey aimed and fired, and Riordian, hit again, squeezed his shot into the ground.

As Riordan fell forward onto his face, Cordrey turned to his wife. He saw that she was trembling violently, near to collapse. He moved to her, caught her in his arms. Lil clung to him, and begged sobbingly, "John, please—please take me home!"

Cordrey held her hard against him.

And said, "Sure, Lil. I'll take you home now, you and Sam."

THE END

(Continued from page 88)

Pardee was behind it, but I couldn't prove it and they had me dead to rights. I'd have been dismissed from the Service, most likely sent to prison. I couldn't face it. I was thinkin' of killin' myself.

"I reckon that gave Hugh his idea. We fixed it up so it would look like I was dead, knowing that with me out of the way the gang wouldn't go through with the frame-up. No use in it any more, you see. Then Hugh went an' arranged with headquarters to make it seem like he had been disgraced, so he'd have a better chance to get in with the gang and prove the frame-up."

"Then," the girl said wonderingly, "he's been on the force all the time? Oh, Dad, why didn't you tell me about it?"

"It was mighty hard not to, honey, but it had to look like it was real. We was afraid you wouldn't be able to act it out well enough, the grief and all."

"An' now—now it's all over? There's no more danger to you?"

Jethro looked over the dead body of Stud Pardee. "I reckon Stud won't be framin' anybody any more," he said gently.

Lissa turned falteringly to Hugh Bennett. "Oh, Hugh," she said softly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I reckon I wouldn't have wanted it any other way, Lissa," Hugh Bennett said. "Seeing the kind you had to think I was."

And then his arms were around her. She looked up at him, her face suddenly radiant. "I won't ever think you're a quitter and a crook again—no matter how it looks—Sergeant Hugh Bennett," she told him proudly.

"Maybe you better say 'Captain Bennett,' honey," Jethro Harbin told her. "I'm thinkin' it's my time to retire—an' I reckon headquarters'll know who ought to get my place."

THE END

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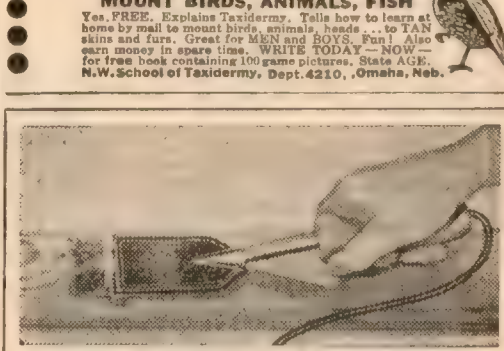

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(Continued from page 63)

his shirt and skin as he emerged. The north wind tore at his breath. He slid as quietly as he could down the shingle roof to the low edge and dropped to the ground.

Out in the Caprock the night stretched out, black and tortured. Straining for a sound inside, and hearing none, he rushed around the corner with nerves tense, and softly opened the door. For the second time that night he felt the warmth of his kitchen, the lingering smell of the frijoles from Marlie's stove.

TWO minutes later they stood beside the bed and looked down at Blackie Filbro. The lamp's flickering flame made little shadows play in Filbro's dirty beard and on the cracked lips of his open, hard-breathing mouth. Matthew had broken the string from the closet door and now was taking it from the shotgun trigger, with his own sixgun transferred from Filbro's pillow to his hip.

He looked from Filbro to Marlie, to her cut and bleeding fingers, and back to the unconscious bulk of the exhausted killer. And he saw Filbro again as the Caprock, at last conquered and made tame.

"You get your fingers bloody, sometimes, fighting it," she murmured.

"That's why two pairs of hands are better than one," Matthew said. "And I reckon they always heal, so you can fight some more."

She nodded, smiling up at him with soft eyes, as if she understood. "He looks—well, almost peaceful there, doesn't he?"

"He'd look better back in Huntsville," Matthew said.

Gently, he prodded the shotgun muzzle into the hairy ear of the snoring bulk. "Get up, Filbro. That's our bed you're sleeping on."

THE MILLS OF THE GUN-GODS

(Continued from page 39)

Mary ran to Jensen. He felt her small head laid trustingly against his chest, and pride swelled in him. Then Mary squeezed his forearm, digging her thumb into the muscle. Jensen grunted, and finally understood.

Jensen said, "I don't know about Mexico. But the company did offer me a transfer to Montana. We could leave tonight, Mary, if you wanted."

Jensen saw the composure go out of big Will Kilbrey. Kilbrey grunted,

"All right, Mary. I won't fight my own family, damn it!"

Mary's head came off Jensen's shoulder. She gave him a happy little hug, then ran to her father. And to Jensen's astonishment all trace of Mary's tears had vanished.

Mary kissed big Will and said, "Oh, dad!" and as Mary ducked her head to her father's shoulder, Jensen very plainly saw Mary close one eye in an impudent wink.

Jensen stood flat-footed and stared, amazement running through him. So Mary, he thought, had faked all this.

But there was more to it than that. There was a good woman's edging of her own father back along the straight and narrow track. There was the fact that Mary had a woman's instinctive trickery, a woman's brains.

Jensen felt a great beat of pride flowing in him. For though this victory was Mary's, it was in a sense his own. Mary loved him. Had she not loved him—

Jensen grinned. He could send a telegram now to the sales manager in the home office. But better than that, he could marry Mary as soon as wedding preparations could be made. He was, Jensen thought, just a big dumb Swede. But lucky.

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(Continued from page 10)

colonel in the Austrian army, was white. The decline of the fur trade and the continuing influx of people he didn't understand or like, caused him to retire to Utah land, take an Indian wife and accept blood brotherhood in the tribe.

He made a little speech, telling them how much was at stake and showing the price of failure. He had not yet been able to prove himself a Utah warrior. This was his chance and an opportunity the tribe must not reject. He could beat yonder giant, he boasted, and he was the only Utah who could.

So the chiefs chose him to represent the tribe, albeit with no great enthusiasm. Al Pfiefer loosed a yell he and Kit Carson, Broken Hand, Bill Williams and Pauline Weaver had loosed when piling down on Taos for the rendezvous. He shed his clothes and palmed his Green River knife, point foremost, and advanced upon the giant.

They came together, but not with a crash. Each knew his steel. Each knew the danger of the missed stroke and being caught off balance. Blades slung and rang. The Navaho pressing always forward, Pfeifer always retreating. Night fell and both men were covered with blood, neither being badly hurt. Big fires were built up and kept stoked.

The hours dragged on. Partisans grew tired of yelling. Swirling smoke sometimes hid the combatants but nothing could hide the slowing of the Navaho giant. His legs were giving out. His tired arms were no longer capable of those hornet-like thrusts. His mouth hung open and the heaving of his breath was audible to all. He was retreating now and the peppery mountain man was all around him, slicing, slashing, punishing.

After while there was not a moment when he could not have killed the Navaho, yet he did not, only letting his knife

point drink blood and counting coups until he had more than a hundred. Everybody knew the Utahs had won the springs long before the end, but the big Navaho tried and tried hard before he sighed and slipped down and passed out.

It was such an exhibition of sportsmanship and courage such as these tribesmen had never seen. Even the Navahoes who had lost made over the little man who had scorned odds and refused to be daunted, for they are a people who revere courage.

And as for the Utes, they decided the Navaho giant had done so well against their triumphant champion, they would permit the Navahoes to come each year to the springs, reserving for them the flats reaching down river from the great boiling cauldron where I stood, recreating in my mind that forgotten scene that brought peace to the beautiful Valley of Pa-Go-Sah.

I felt this yarn pretty strongly. So much has been written about the utter worthlessness of the so-called squaw-man I could not but write something that will show one, at least, who didn't have a yellow fibre in his carcass. And there was nothing much wrong with another squaw-man we know about—Colonel Kit Carson.

Sincerely,
Harry F. Olmsted

Thanks, Harry. We'll undoubtedly hear from you next out at The Creek That Screams, or Hogwash Depot, or Square Corners, or What Have You.

Dan Cushman is another westerner who knows his country out there, having lived in it all his life, and he's slated for our next issue with a big full-length novel. Watch for Ray Nafziger next month too, and also Charlie Tyler. Don't forget to be with us, October 27, when the big December issue hits the stands.

Till then, *Hasta la vista, amigos.*

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There are six principal types of hair loss, or *alopecia*, as it is known in medical terms:

1. Alopecia from diseases of the scalp
2. Alopecia from other diseases or from an improper functioning of the body
3. Alopecia of the aged (senile baldness)
4. Alopecia areata (loss of hair in patches)
5. Alopecia of the young (premature baldness)
6. Alopecia at birth (congenital baldness)

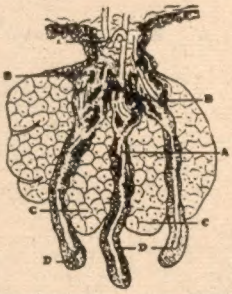
Senile, premature and congenital alopecia cannot be helped by anything now known to modern science. Alopecia from improper functioning of the body requires the advice and treatment of your family physician.

BUT MANY MEDICAL AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE A SPECIFIC SCALP DISEASE IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF HAIR LOSS.

This disease is called Seborrhea and can be broadly classified into two clinical forms with the following symptoms:

1. *DRY SEBORRHEA:* The hair is dry, lifeless, and without gloss. A dry flaky dandruff is usually present with accompanying itchiness. Hair loss is considerable and increases with the progress of this disease.
2. *OILY SEBORRHEA:* The hair and scalp are oily and greasy. The hair is slightly sticky to the touch and has a tendency to mat together. Dandruff takes the form of head scales. Scalp is usually itchy. Hair loss is severe with baldness as the end result.

Many doctors agree that to NEGLECT these symptoms of DRY and OILY SEBORRHEA is to INVITE BALDNESS.



DESTRUCTION OF HAIR FOLLICLES
Caused By Seborrhea

A — Dead hairs; B — Hair-destroying bacteria; C — Hypertrophied sebaceous glands; D — Atrophic follicles.

Seborrhea is believed to be caused by three germ organisms — staphylococcus albus, pityrosporum ovale, and acnes bacillus.

These germs attack the sebaceous gland causing an abnormal working of this fat gland. The hair follicle, completely surrounded by the enlarged diseased sebaceous gland, then begins to atrophy. The hair produced becomes smaller and smaller until the hair follicle dies. Baldness is the inevitable result. (See illustration.)

But seborrhea can be controlled, particularly in its early stages. The three germ organisms believed to cause seborrhea, can and should be eliminated before they destroy your normal hair growth.

A post-war development, Comate Medicinal Formula kills these three germ organisms on contact. Proof of Comate's germ-killing properties has been demonstrated in laboratory tests recently conducted by one of the leading testing laboratories in America. (Complete report on file and copies are available on request.)

When used as directed, Comate Medicinal Formula controls seborrhea—stimulates the flow of blood to the scalp—helps stop scalp itch and burn—improves the appearance of your hair and scalp—helps STOP HAIR LOSS due to seborrhea. Your hair looks more attractive and alive.

You may safely follow the example of thousands who first were skeptical, then curious, and finally decided to avail themselves of Comate Medicinal Formula.

A Few of the Many Grateful Expressions By Users of Comate Medicinal Formula

"My hair was coming out for years and I tried everything. Nothing stopped it until I tried Comate. Now my hair has stopped coming out. It looks so much thicker. My friends have noticed my hair and they all say it looks so much better." —Mrs. R.E.J., Stevenson, Ala

"Your hair formula got rid of my dandruff; my head does not itch any more. I think it is the best of all of the formulas I have used."—E.E., Hamilton, Ohio.

"Your formula is everything you claim it to be and the first 10 days trial freed me of a very bad case of dry seborrhea." —J.E.M., Long Beach, Calif.

"I do want to say that just within five days I have obtained a great improvement in my hair. I do want to thank you and the Comate Laboratories for producing such a wonderful and amazing formula."—M.M., Johnstown, Pa.

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"My hair looks thicker, not falling out like it used to. Will not be without Comate in the house."—R.W., Lonsdale, R. I.

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"This formula is everything if not more than you say it is. I am very happy with what it's doing for my hair." —T.J., Las Cruces, New Mexico

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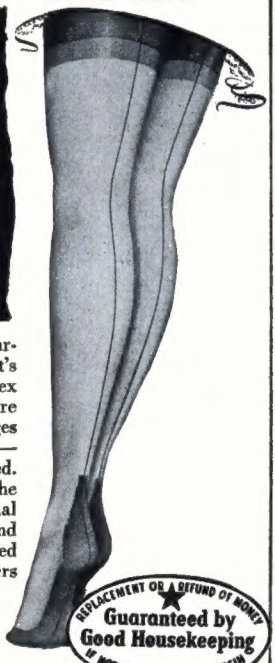
Regardless of Cause!



The world's ONLY complete, nationally advertised nylon hosiery line actually guaranteed against runs, snags or excessive wear, REGARDLESS OF CAUSE! It's amazing, but true! No matter what the cause—hard use or deliberate abuse—Kendex nylons are replaced FREE if they run, snag or become unfit for wear within entire guarantee period! Every weight from sheerest 15 denier to heavy 70 denier—all gauges up to luxury 60 gauge—all sizes, lengths, popular shades, fancy heels, black seams—full fashioned and seamless. Nothing is missing to make sure every woman is pleased. In spite of the amazing guarantee, retail postage prepaid prices start at $1.08 the pair for sheerest 15 denier 51 gauge. Should free replacement be necessary, actual cost becomes 54¢ a pair! How could any woman possibly resist saving money and solving her hosiery problems? NOT SOLD IN STORES. Men and women wanted NOW, spare or full time, to write orders and earn big money. You can get orders even if you never sold a thing in your life!

MEN'S HOSE GUARANTEED 1 YEAR

Kendex gives you FOUR complete lines, including sensational men's hosiery line actually guaranteed for ONE YEAR! Any pair not giving satisfactory wear within 12 months is replaced FREE without question. All styles, patterns, colors, yarns (including nylon) at lowest prices that mean steady income for you 52 weeks a year.

LINGERIE HOUSECOATS—ROBES

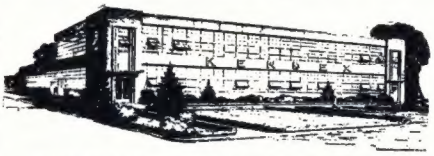
Full line of lingerie, housecoats and robes. Woven and knitted fabrics—rayon, cotton and NYLON. Nothing is lacking. Unbelievable prices that defy competition and make women eager to order. Imagine a beautiful all NYLON slip, with NYLON lace, at $2.95 or a lace trimmed rayon satin slip at $1.58! Kendex values sell themselves.

NATIONALLY ADVERTISED

Kendex has advertised in Life, Look, Collier's, McCall's, Saturday Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, etc. Carries the Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal. Thousands of orders shipped daily. Yearly volume in millions. A dependable responsible national organization.

FREE NYLON STOCKING AND MONEY-MAKING OUTFITS

Man or woman — young or old, YOU can easily earn steady income, spare or full time. No money or experience needed. We supply EVERYTHING free and set you up in business at OUR expense. Nothing to buy or deliver. Write orders. we deliver and collect. Big advance pay plus huge cash bonus that increases your earnings up to 40%! Your name and address on postcard will bring you sample nylon stocking; samples of lingerie, hose, robe materials; self-selling sales books with FULL COLOR illustrations; 36-page sales manual showing you easy steps to success; color cards, free "door openers" worth $1 each but which you give away free; special plan to have others sell for you, etc., etc. You can start making money the minute you receive the complete FREE outfits!



YOUR COST ONE CENT!

SEND NO MONEY. Pay nothing now or later No obligation. Not even a promise to return outfits. Simply write your name and address on a penny postcard and mail to us. We'll immediately rush you everything you need FREE and postage prepaid. WRITE TODAY!

KENDEX CORPORATION • BABYLON 69, N. Y.

Painted for O'Keefe's by the well-known Canadian artist, Oscar Cahen

This is your Canada Unlimited

It's fall fair time . . . and everyone from miles around gathers to watch the judging and enjoy the fun. Here friendly competition honors the finest cattle, the biggest pumpkins, and the tastiest preserves in the country.

The fall fair has become a tradition with Canadians, for it brings us close to our earliest days. You will enjoy reading the story of how Canada has become a great nation . . . a story told with all its power in "CANADA UNLIMITED", an illustrated 144-page book published by the O'Keefe Foundation.

To obtain your copy of this exciting book, send 25 cents in cash (no stamps or cheques, please) to "Canada Unlimited", Dept. "Y", O'Keefe House, Toronto, Ontario. Please print your name and address clearly. Your money will be donated to the Canadian Citizenship Council . . . a group of service, welfare, fraternal and other organizations. The aim of this Council is to acquaint new Canadians with the opportunities offered by democratic citizenship in Canada.

O'Keefe's

BREWING COMPANY LIMITED

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